

DEMOCRACY FIRST: HOW THE U.S. CAN PREVAIL IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEMS COMPETITION WITH THE CCP

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SEPTEMBER 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief examines the role of U.S. democracy promotion in America's broader China strategy. It examines how China's malign influence tactics corrode democracy in target countries, explains the impact on U.S. interests, and then provides recommendations for using U.S. support for democracy to secure American objectives and compete with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The CCP employs a suite of tactics to advance its strategic influence in countries around the world, in the process exploiting and exacerbating democratic weaknesses in target states. The CCP's use of these different means of influence simultaneously has a pernicious effect on developing democracies. Beijing's manipulation of the information space and discourse ensures the neutering of institutions such as an independent media and civil society which, in a healthy democracy, would expose the negative consequences of China's opaque dealmaking and corrupt practices. Beijing is not only weakening democracies around the world through its drive for strategic advantage and influence; the CCP is actively popularizing an authoritarian alternative to democratic governance.

If Washington's China strategy is to effect its desired change — a world where America is secure and remains the preeminent power — it must include investments focused on winning the competition of political systems. The goal of this strategy should be a world in which democracy is the predominant form of national governance because it is the model with the best chance of delivering peace and prosperity for citizens.

Three pillars of action should comprise the U.S. approach to protecting and promoting democratic governance, working with like-minded allies, to prevail against China in the contest of political systems.

The first pillar consists of elevating the protection and promotion of democracy as a key consideration in crafting and executing U.S. foreign policy; and being deliberate about formulating the network of allies necessary to win the broader competition. Along with placing democracy support at the center of U.S. foreign policy decisionmaking, Washington should expedite the formalization of the D-10 as a forum for leading democracies to coordinate.

The second pillar involves using foreign assistance and diplomacy to make countries more resilient to CCP coercion. Specific actions include reinforcing the foundational institutions of democracy to bolster them against external interference; strengthening the capacity of civil society to uncover corruption, increase transparency, and hold leaders accountable; and expanding the ranks and capacity of independent, investigative journalists and civil society organizations able to expose Chinese malign influence tactics.

The third pillar is championing the superiority of liberal democracy to authoritarianism. Specifically, Washington should empower U.S. diplomats to champion the benefits of American democracy, while being frank that it remains a work in progress; tailor messaging to highlight examples of democracy successes that are relevant to the target audience; and expand citizen diplomacy exchanges — to the United States and other countries — so that individuals in countries vulnerable to or experiencing CCP influence can see the fruits of democracy first-hand.

INTRODUCTION

The United States, as part of its overarching push to posture for the new era of great power competition, has reshaped how it uses military and economic tools to compete with the People's Republic of China and other adversaries. It has yet to fully utilize the compelling and powerful tool of democracy promotion. A fully developed democracy strategy can provide critical reinforcement to the military and economic pillars, while providing stark contrast to the brittle authoritarianism which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) relies upon.

The United States has repositioned military assets to Asia to deter Chinese aggression. It has invested mightily in punishing China commercially, through sanctions and tariffs, even if the trade war has not had its intended impact. To mitigate the negative effects of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese President Xi Jinping's strategic global infrastructure investment effort, the U.S. established the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) to mobilize private infrastructure investment in the developing world, and has been expanding collaboration with allies and partners through the new Blue Dot Network, an initiative launched with Australia and Japan to bring together other governments, the private sector, and civil society to encourage adoption of standards for quality infrastructure.¹

The Trump administration has also reportedly explored realigning how the United States uses foreign assistance of all stripes — from economic aid to health assistance — to make competing with China the primary driving force.²



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The military and commercial elements of U.S. strategy account for China's deliberate efforts to strengthen its own defense capabilities and economic position. Washington's responses to China's growing influence in Asia and globally have largely fit the model of a traditional "great power competition" in which an established great power responds to the rise of a rival in the international system, ideally without falling into the oft-cited (though underdetermined) "Thucydides Trap" of great power conflict. But the challenge posed by China under the leadership of the CCP is better defined as a contest of systems that will play out globally, rather than primarily a competition for power and primacy in Asia.

To date, U.S. strategy does not address the full spectrum of CCP efforts — particularly those in the *political* domain — which pose an unprecedented challenge to America, its allies, and the liberal global order. The CCP, through economic influence, information operations, elite capture, and other tactics, is both *corroding democratic governance* and *popularizing authoritarian governance* in countries the world over, with deleterious effects for U.S. influence and interests.

The strength of democracy in places where the United States and China are competing will influence the competition's trajectory and result. Less democratic countries, with weaker internal checks and balances, are more vulnerable to CCP coercion or cooptation. It is now indisputable that the CCP intentionally exploits democratic weaknesses to advance its interests, and in so doing — along with other efforts — exacerbates existing vulnerabilities or births new ones.³

If Washington's China strategy is to effect its desired change — a world where America is secure and remains the preeminent power — it must include investments focused on winning the competition of political systems; that is, how countries across the world are governed. A deterrence capability absent a democracy strategy will not be enough to underwrite the global order that has served American interests for the last half century.

Importantly, support for democratic governance around the world is of unquestionable long-term value to America's ability to compete with China even in the

midst of a dynamic, “unknowable” environment⁴ where it is nearly impossible to offer helpful prescriptive solutions around many oft-discussed aspects of Washington’s competition with Beijing, such as economic and technological “decoupling” and the U.S. strategic posture in East Asia.⁵

Regardless of how factors like COVID-19, the U.S. presidential election, or the ongoing trade war impact U.S.-China relations in coming months, a democracy strategy will remain essential to advancing U.S. interests and values in our global competition with China.

To meet this need, this policy brief examines the role U.S. democracy promotion should play as part of America’s broader China strategy. We define democracy *promotion* as support the United States provides to protect and strengthen democratic governance abroad. This support takes two forms. First, U.S. foreign assistance programs that aim to strengthen the capacity of democratic institutions or actors within and outside government. And second, U.S. diplomatic engagement that endeavors to champion local democracy advocates or hold despotic regimes accountable for their actions.

The paper proceeds in three core sections. First, it describes the suite of tactics the CCP uses to exert its malign influence in countries to advance its interests, and the effect of these actions on governance and stability therein. The section affirms why supporting democratic governance — and focusing on the competition’s broader political domain — must be a core component of U.S. China strategy. The second section summarizes the broad contours of what a political systems strategy should comprise, to include a goal and associated end-state. The third section outlines specific ways the United States can use foreign assistance and diplomacy to compete with China, to include making targeted states more resilient to CCP coercion and championing the superiority of liberal democracy to China’s authoritarian option. These recommendations apply globally — given that democracies in the West and beyond are under strain — but focus principally on the developing world where democracy is at greatest risk.

THE PROBLEM: CHINA’S EROSION OF DEMOCRACY AND CONSEQUENCES FOR U.S. INTERESTS

If the United States is to compete effectively with China we need, first, to recognize how the CCP is undermining democracy and challenging U.S. interests and values globally. Then, the United States must tailor its strategy to counter and, where possible, preempt Beijing’s efforts.

The CCP employs a suite of tactics to advance its strategic influence in countries around the world, in the process exploiting and exacerbating democratic weaknesses in target states. Chinese government-linked companies and policy banks sign opaque deals through the BRI that ensure China lends and is repaid at a premium to hire Chinese companies and workers for infrastructure and energy projects. BRI projects frequently saddle countries with debt and few alternatives to returning to China to continue financing those debts. In countries such as Ecuador, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, the result has been a cycle of dependence on Beijing.

This lack of transparency sets a foundation for rampant corruption, with the goal of ensuring subsidized Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) undercut their competition and secure contracts with highly favorable terms to carry out projects financed by Chinese policy banks. The CCP cultivates “friends” among elites in many countries who are only too willing to sign up to opaque investment deals that undermine their country’s long-term prosperity in return for personal enrichment.⁶

Such corruption also facilitates the CCP’s ability to exert influence in a second area, the information space. Beijing’s foreign propaganda and censorship efforts have traditionally focused on promoting China’s political and economic system while suppressing coverage of its domestic human rights abuses and religious persecution. But the Chinese government and its proxies increasingly are attempting to tilt other countries’ internal debates about their relationships with China, including by suppressing criticism of Chinese activities within their borders. Many

governments, including our own, engage in vigorous public diplomacy campaigns, but the CCP's methods are frequently covert, coercive, and harmful to democratic institutions.

China's manipulation of the information environment in countries around the world is critical to the CCP's ability to protect its expanding interests and legitimize China's authoritarian development model abroad. Ensuring the presentation of a positive "China story," as Xi has put it, helps to smooth the path for investments that benefit China's economy.⁷

The CCP has a large and growing set of tools it uses to advance its narrative abroad and to quiet critics. These include pervasive official propaganda, investment in cash-strapped foreign media outlets, journalist "trainings" and exchanges designed to encourage appreciation of China's policies and the BRI in particular, and funding of research and academic institutions.⁸ The CCP's increasingly aggressive use of so-called "united front work" abroad includes more covert efforts to cultivate China-friendly elites and squelch narratives critical of China.⁹

In particular, the CCP targets Chinese diaspora groups for influence, using coercion and inducements to compel students and business to act as political agents. China controls many diaspora media organizations and regularly hosts gatherings of Chinese-language media from around the world. China also influences Taiwanese media through annual cross-strait media forums at which participants are encouraged to support the CCP line on topics such as Taiwan and Hong Kong.¹⁰

The CCP's use of these different means of influence simultaneously has a pernicious effect on developing democracies. Beijing's manipulation of the information space and discourse ensures the neutering of institutions such as an independent media and civil society which, in a healthy democracy, would expose the negative consequences for a country of China's opaque dealmaking and corrupt practices.

Beijing is not only weakening democracies around the world through its drive for strategic advantage and influence; the CCP is actively popularizing an authoritarian alternative to democratic governance. To do so, China trades on its remarkable economic rise over the past few decades, which Xi in 2017 declared

demonstrates the viability of a development model not predicated on democratic governance.¹¹ This message is highly attractive to leaders who, lacking popular support and afraid of what open political space could pose for their control, hope to achieve economic success without answering to the demands of democratic societies.



From Cambodia to Serbia to Uganda, China is offering such illiberal actors large-scale trainings on manipulating public opinion, censoring and surveilling journalists and civil society activists, and implementing China-style cybersecurity policies.

China's investments bolster the fortunes of illiberal actors eager to accept loans unconditioned on markers of good governance and to take credit for delivering on much-needed infrastructure projects, no matter the long-term costs of financing deals signed behind closed doors. From Cambodia to Serbia to Uganda, China is offering such illiberal actors large-scale trainings on manipulating public opinion, censoring and surveilling journalists and civil society activists, and implementing China-style cybersecurity policies. China also offers increasingly sophisticated surveillance and monitoring technology to governments looking to control their populations and is increasing cooperation on domestic policing and security. Taken together, these activities lend credence to illiberal actors' claims that they can deliver economic development, security, and stability through increasingly authoritarian policies. China's growing influence over news production and content¹² is also undercutting democratic governance and media freedom.

Beijing's influence plays a clear role in encouraging democratic backsliding in countries around the world. These actions have the potential to draw numerous fragile democracies of strategic significance into China's orbit and away from the United States and its allies. This represents a clear and significant threat to U.S. strategic and economic interests and has the potential to weaken the American-led liberal democratic order.

THE STRATEGY: WINNING THE POLITICAL SYSTEMS COMPETITION

The section above makes clear that China's strategy and tactics erode democracy and have dire consequences for U.S. short- and long-term interests. Both directly and inadvertently, the CCP is promoting an authoritarian variant of governance that cannot go unchecked. Just as the United States needs a military strategy to deter Chinese missile strikes or naval incursions — and an approach to bilateral trade that protects American businesses — so too does it need an approach to win the political systems competition with Beijing.

Now is the time for the United States to implement a grand strategy focused on winning the competition for political systems, working with its democratic partners at both the multilateral and country level. Democracy promotion should be embedded in a broader collective effort with allies across the Indo-Pacific and Europe to counter China's aggressive drive for global influence and against the values we share. In doing so, the United States can capitalize on its allies' significant capacity to support good governance and their proximity to — and deep relationships with — democratic actors in their own neighborhoods.



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The goal of this strategy should be a world where democracy is the predominant form of governance because it is the model with the best chance of delivering peace and prosperity for citizens. Democracies are less likely to go to war with each other, and therefore with the United States. Strong democracies with robust institutions have fewer, if any, semi-governed spaces that terrorists can

exploit to orchestrate attacks onto U.S. interests. For these reasons and others, responsive governance in countries abroad is an essential contributor to U.S. national security and broader economic prosperity. The commitment to support overseas extends back to the founding of the United States. It is not something new or radical, though the United States has pursued this end with different means, and varying degrees of intensity, at different times.

As our colleagues write elsewhere,¹³ the U.S. political systems strategy should contain four components: *countering malign authoritarian influence* by establishing a global initiative to thwart Chinese and Russian attempts to shape the world order to their benefit; *bolstering democracy where it is most vulnerable* to malign authoritarian influence by using diplomacy to champion democracy advocates and decry authoritarian regimes as well as foreign assistance to bolster institutions and resilience to the CCP; *winning the war of ideas with the CCP*, which is touting the superiority of its model, by vocally discrediting this narrative and countering CCP information operations; and *reforming multilateral institutions coopted by authoritarian states* while also continuing to assert U.S. influence (and associated democratic values) within the structures as they stand today.

The balance of this document outlines how democracy assistance and broader promotion via diplomacy should fit into such a political systems competition strategy.

SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY THROUGH FOREIGN ASSISTANCE AND DIPLOMACY: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

Three pillars of action should comprise the U.S. approach to protecting and promoting democratic governance, with like-minded allies, to prevail against China in the contest of political systems. First, Washington should elevate protecting and promoting democracy as a key consideration when crafting and executing foreign policy; and be deliberate about formulating the network of allies necessary to win

the broader competition. The second and third pillars involve using foreign assistance and diplomacy to make countries more resilient to CCP coercion and champion the superiority of liberal democracy to authoritarianism, respectively.

Pillar 1: Go on offense and make clear that the United States stands with fellow democracies

The first pillar aims to lay the foundation for appropriately prioritizing democracy support in U.S. foreign policy discussions and updating the American alliance system to compete with China. It outlines diplomatic initiatives the United States can consider to clearly demonstrate that it stands with countries and leaders committed to enabling citizens to choose their own destiny via democratic governance, and that CCP attempts to erode democracy will face consequences.

1. Make protecting and supporting democracy abroad a central U.S. interest that directly influences American foreign policy decisionmaking

Over the last two decades, countering terrorist threats to the American homeland and interests abroad was one of — if not the primary — ordering principle for U.S. foreign policy. This prioritization meant that the United States would in some instances look past how leaders treat their people or respect democratic norms if the regime was a reliable partner in the war on terror. The menace of terrorism from non-state armed actors has not fully dissipated, but no longer remains the core threat to Americans' livelihoods and security.



The factors the United States uses to shape and execute policy must be updated accordingly and reflect the new threat landscape.

The factors the United States uses to shape and execute policy must be updated accordingly and reflect the new threat landscape. The Trump administration's clear focus on great power competition is a step in the right direction. To win this competition, however, the United States must put protecting and promoting

democracy on par with other factors. Doing so advances U.S. interests and values. Turning a blind eye to authoritarians' behavior to serve counterterrorism or economic interests plays into China's hands by eroding the fundamental tenets of democracy that can inoculate states against the CCP's incursions.

Making democracy a central rather than peripheral interest will come with trade-offs. This could involve reevaluating alliances that, while once convenient to fight non-state armed actors, are counterproductive for achieving our interests today. And realistically, in some instances, particularly in Asia, the United States will have a delicate balance to strike. This could include weighing supporting democratic actors and criticizing illiberal policies against preserving ties to leaders who threaten to sever ties to Washington and embrace a dependent relationship with China (which has no compunctions about progress on governance and human rights.)

Making democracy central will inform how the United States interacts with allies and adversaries. For the former, it may involve pressuring U.S. allies that are backsliding or abusing their citizens. For countries that are not formal allies, it could mean siding with countries targeted by Beijing and retaliating in solidarity with them when they are coerced.

Fulsomely considering democracy in foreign policy decisionmaking is not to say this factor should consistently trump other interests. Our recommendation is to move protecting and promoting democracy higher up the list of rank-order priorities so that the United States is forming policy that effectively addresses the current threat landscape rather than needlessly holding on to outdated assessments and policy. If the United States does not make this change, it risks enacting policies that do not respond to existing threats and position it for failure in the broader political systems competition with China.

2. Expedite the formalization of the D-10

The United States cannot win the political systems competition with China alone. Doing so will require pooling resources and coordinating actions with like-minded allies. The U.S. should continue working bilaterally with individual allies on related initiatives. Given the gravity of the challenge, however, the United

States should solidify a powerful counterweight to China — and other revisionist authoritarian actors, like Russia — that is committed to supporting democracy. Rather than being “against” China, the group should be “for” supporting free and open societies and committed to supporting these freedoms within their own societies and ensuring citizens in other states have the same liberties. While developed democracies have trouble agreeing to a common position on many aspects of competition with China, they are all in agreement with these principles. These common things the countries support will make the grouping stick, whereas having it be “against” China would immediately bring the differences over what that means to the fore.

The most viable, actionable forum to address this need is the D-10 (Democratic 10) group of democracies. First convened through informal consultations in 2014, the D-10 is a group of democracies committed to working together to address global threats and challenges.¹⁴ Most recently, the United Kingdom announced its intent to work through an updated D-10 (comprising the current G-7 members, plus South Korea, India, and Australia) to create alternative suppliers of 5G equipment and other technologies to avoid relying on China and Huawei.¹⁵ The United States should work with the U.K. and others to formalize this group and to develop a common, positive vision and approach to promoting and protecting democracy as well as, to the extent feasible, dealing with China.

In the near-term, the United States and D-10 partners should take two immediate steps. First, formalize criteria for bringing other countries such as New Zealand into the group and work with those states who hold up these democratic ideals and are at the frontlines of combatting China, such as Taiwan, or countering threats from other authoritarian states. Second, the D-10 should immediately get to work establishing a joint effort to identify and support democratic, citizen-centered, technologically-enabled solutions in countries across the developing world facing significant economic, governance, and societal challenges as a result of the pandemic. Such a united D-10 effort would demonstrate that the U.S. and its allies and partners are committed to going beyond rhetoric to support democracy at a time when illiberal leaders — established and aspiring — are capitalizing on the pandemic to expand their control.

Pillar 2: Increase resilience to CCP coercion and cooptation

Alone and with the allies and partners listed above, the United States should support countries’ resilience to CCP coercion and cooptation. Resilience to external interference means that a country and its citizens have the knowledge, tools, and robust institutions to identify, expose, and counter malign influence. This resilience can manifest in numerous observable ways, from the removal of corrupt, China-friendly leaders from power in countries like the Maldives and Ecuador to the exposure of China’s opaque dealmaking and political interference in the media, as has occurred in Kenya.



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Beijing has demonstrated a remarkable ability to maintain and extend its influence in a country even after a friendly illiberal regime loses power, often to an opponent critical of its predecessor’s close ties to China.¹⁶ This reflects the CCP’s ability to cultivate a broad cross section of elites in many countries and to establish a state’s enduring dependence on China for continued financing. China’s influence among elites in many developing countries speaks to the importance of supporting a foundation of democratic actors committed to exerting consistent, bottom-up pressure on their own officials to remain transparent in dealings with China and to protect democratic institutions as a country engages with Beijing.

The United States and its allies can use democracy assistance to shore up resilience in countries already exposed to CCP interference, at the cusp of such interventions, or likely to experience them moving forward. U.S. assistance can be tailored to address the specific tactics employed by the CCP in each context,

the capacity level of civil society and government partners in each country to counter those tactics, and the strategic import for the United States of the target countries.

Resources being finite, Washington will need to make difficult choices about where to focus energies on preventing or rolling back China's interference. The United States can use standard inter-agency processes for determining which countries matter most and why, guided by metrics informed by work from the State Department and Intelligence Community. Beyond assessing a country's importance to U.S. interests, the United States should weigh ability to make an impact with diplomatic engagement or foreign assistance, given the finite nature of these resources. Many countries across the globe are obvious choices for U.S. attention given their strategic significance, including Panama, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Myanmar, and Pacific Island countries. In others, such as Guyana, where recent energy finds have piqued Beijing's interest, quick interventions now to raise limited awareness of CCP methods could bolster resilience on the cheap in countries exposed to a drastic increase in attention from Beijing.

U.S. officials should take this broader view of places to invest, rather than employ solely a narrow focus on those places already straining from CCP overreach or in the party's crosshairs (though we should clearly work in these places as well). Three types of democracy assistance approaches, all proven effective over decades, can help accomplish this goal. They can be mixed and matched to reflect the realities of the target country.

1. Reinforce the foundational institutions of democracy to bolster them against external interference

Strong democratic institutions are the first and most formidable line of defense that free nations have against external attempts to exert influence into domestic politics. Supporting these formal institutions — from capable political parties to an independent judiciary — should be the keystone to any democracy promotion strategy focused on mitigating the CCP's influence and securing U.S. interests.

Political parties link citizens to government by directing peoples' views into policy and then, if elected, law. Independent electoral authorities help ensure that results reflect the will of the people. An independent judiciary helps maintain the rule of law, essential to holding leaders and citizens accountable. Predictable regulations and adherence to them helps attract foreign direct investment and thereby reduce reliance on China's opaque BRI financing and investment deals. Civil society organizations push for reform, expose graft, and help hold leaders to their promises. Independent media serves a watchdog role fundamental to transparency and accountability.

Collectively, these components of democracy and governance serve as the foundation for governments that are responsive to citizens' needs and better able to mitigate incursions from the CCP. Robust institutions with procedural checks and balances can help expose and undercut attempts by those elites the CCP has captured to advance proposals or narratives on behalf of Beijing. The United States has supported partner political institutions — from legislatures to political parties — for decades through a variety of means, including technical assistance from private nongovernmental organizations like ours (the International Republican Institute), funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department. It is imperative that this technical assistance continue, and continue to be provided in a professional, impartial manner.

There is significant variation in CCP methods of influence, which are targeted according to the state of governance and transparency in the country in which China is operating. Chinese financing and SOE practices are less consistent with accepted international standards in countries with looser regulation practices, public procurement rules, and labor regulations. This finding underlines the importance of focusing on the context in individual countries targeted for CCP influence and proactively bolstering fragile democratic institutions to counter the malign effects.¹⁷

2. Strengthen the capacity of civil society to uncover corruption, increase transparency, and hold leaders accountable

Strong government institutions are essential to resiliency. But even the most modern democratic bodies are often staffed by individuals or parties prone to corruption and prioritizing self-interest over the citizenry. Recognizing this, the United States has invested heavily in fortifying civil society groups in developing countries as a watchdog of, and check against, government decisionmaking. These programs have successfully helped civil society actors in many places be more capable of holding leaders accountable and increasing transparency.¹⁸ In North Macedonia, for example, through a program funded by USAID, local civil society organizations launched an open finance portal that enables citizens and civil society organizations to monitor state budget transactions.¹⁹ Within months of making 10 years of transactions available to the public, the online tool led to the uncovering of two high-level scandals involving misuse of taxpayer funds.

Publishing government data online makes it harder for officials to misappropriate funds and empowers citizens, and elected officials, to press for more transparent and fair deals with foreign governments (like China) and commercial partners.

The United States has pivoted some resources to supporting civil society organizations in countries vulnerable to CCP influence. This is a promising sign, but resources allocated to date — or projected to be in the near-term — do not match the scope of the problem. This assistance needs to be strategic and targeted, drawing on the years of investment and learning in this sector.

In some countries, broad-based capacity strengthening and financial support programs can invigorate or sustain civil society groups, enabling them to engage with citizens at all levels to gather information and raise awareness on issues relating to malign influence. Beyond that, support must be tailored to specific country situations, enabling the sophisticated initiatives as described above in the North Macedonia example, but also branching into local civil society-led targeted legal actions, popular advocacy campaigns, or even direct protest activities.

In many of the countries most vulnerable to malign influence, civil society often provides the only outlet for expression of political activity. To achieve greatest impact, the United States must become more comfortable providing support to democratic civil society actors willing to take on more overtly political positions.

3. Expand the ranks and capacity of independent, investigative journalists and civil society organizations able to expose Chinese malign influence tactics

Societies cannot counter or preempt Chinese interference or unbalanced deals if they are not aware of these actions in the first place. This is why China has gone to such great lengths — from Australia to Zambia — to shape the local media landscape so that it does not expose these tactics and instead paints China in a positive light.

China is most likely to aggressively employ “sharp power” tools in countries that have demonstrated resilience to its economic-influence tactics. The CCP increasingly seeks to head off criticism of Chinese investments and capture of a country’s elites, thereby preventing its negative influence from becoming an election issue as it has in many countries, including Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Zambia.

U.S.-funded trainings have enhanced foreign journalists’ skills and conveyed the importance of the independent watchdog role of journalism.²⁰ The United States should expand these programs and target them in countries that are most vulnerable to CCP interference and of greatest strategic importance to America. These programs could expose details of BRI deals and CCP information operations, and thereby galvanize citizens to push their governments for action.

Local journalists can also play a critical role to educate their publics — and their own governments — on the nature and structure of decisionmaking in China, and the primacy of the party’s interests over any other factor. Discussion of the CCP’s lack of transparency and accountability can highlight the inherent danger posed by China’s governance system, as when its obfuscation of facts about the novel coronavirus’s

origins, means of spreading, and morbidity delayed global responses to the pandemic.²¹ Even a slightly deeper understanding of the CCP's power dynamics and incentive structures can provide necessary context for target country stakeholders as they engage with their Chinese counterparts.

Trainings also need to ensure that journalists are equipped for the digital era — including helping to identify the CCP's digital vectors for influence and equipping journalists with a digital forensics toolkit. The CCP is currently engaged in a coordinated campaign to control the world's future communications technologies, a strategy that would give Beijing unprecedented capacity to control the global information environment, as well as a major economic and military advantage. On the latter point — the importance of digital forensics — many of the CCP's most egregious actions have been exposed through digital investigations, for instance through tracking satellite imagery of infrastructure projects to expose corruption, or tracing information operations back to CCP-linked actors. The two are intrinsically linked. By exposing journalists and researchers to digital forensics, the value of a free and open internet in which information and tools are widely available takes on a personal quality, which then leads to a deeper understanding as to why and how the China model for digital communications threatens democratic integrity.

These efforts are reinforced by high-quality independent journalism through channels such as Voice of America and Radio Free Asia that offer counterpoints to CCP-funded local media outlets. The United States must continue supporting these outlets, which are vital for pushing independent, objective news into closed and closing spaces. It is imperative to maintain the nonpartisan nature of these outlets and their editorial independence.

Pillar 3: Vocally champion the benefits of democracy

The third pillar should demonstrate the benefits of liberal democracy. The aim is to pull countries toward adopting such practices, even as assistance within them helps foster the necessary institutions and norms.

1. Empower U.S. diplomats to champion the benefits of American democracy, while being frank that it remains a work in progress

The ability of the United States to support democracy abroad is linked to the strength of its institutions at home. Making recommendations on whether or how to strengthen U.S. democracy, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. U.S. domestic politics and the state of its institutions are relevant in so far as autocrats abroad often cite shortcomings in the United States as reasons why democracy is a sham and countries should not adopt associated practices. The United States needs to neutralize such narratives to thwart the CCP's attempts to spread its illiberal governance model.



U.S. diplomats should more vocally and proactively assert the shortcomings of U.S. democracy — and frame it as what it is: not necessarily a faultless “shining city upon a hill” but a work in progress.

To do so, U.S. diplomats should more vocally and proactively assert the shortcomings of U.S. democracy — and frame it as what it is: not necessarily a faultless “shining city upon a hill” but a work in progress. The transparency of the U.S. system and the way in which its shortcomings are on full view is an incredible strength. The United States can more effectively champion democracy as the superior systems model by talking about how it is a work in progress that has evolved for 200-plus years to create a more perfect union. Political transitions to something resembling consolidated democracy are a multi-decade, not multi-month, effort. The executive branch should empower the diplomatic corps to reference the real-time learning happening within our own system and institutions. We have the confidence to conduct honest self-appraisal, China and the CCP do not.

2. Tailor messaging to highlight examples of democracy successes that are relevant to the target audience and realistic to accomplish

The second calibration diplomats should make to messaging, and what some already use, is to reference non-U.S. — and non-Western — success stories. If the United States is messaging the leadership of the Central African Republic or Myanmar, for example, references to successful reforms in Ghana and Taiwan, respectively, are more likely to resonate — and be seen as more realistic models — than if we were to champion the U.S. alone as an example. In making these examples, however, U.S. diplomats should be careful to cite examples with comparable contexts. For example, just because Tunisia went through a relatively successful transition does not mean its lessons will apply — in whole or in part — to any potential opening in, say, Belarus. There is a tendency within policymaking circles to falsely equate transition processes — and any associated lessons on how best to support them — regardless of potential dissimilarities in context. Careful analysis of what lessons apply and are realistic should inform all targeted diplomatic messages.

Where not unduly sensitive, Washington should also dedicate more resources to ensuring governments and citizens are aware of the positive impact U.S. support for good governance and transparency programming in their countries is having on local communities and people's daily lives. China does an excellent job deploying splashy mass messaging and timing official visits to gain maximum credit for even small dedications of medical and other humanitarian assistance, not to mention its infrastructure investments, while the United States' often more substantial and longer-term assistance initiatives achieve less recognition.

The United States is not the only successful democracy. Other cases, such as Taiwan or Ghana, could resonate even more with actors in countries susceptible to CCP influence. The Taiwan example, in particular, counters the CCP's argument that Chinese culture is somehow incompatible with democracy. Pushing back against that central CCP narrative provides an opening to challenge other similar lines of propaganda. The United States should highlight these cases through its diplomacy and foreign assistance programs to include offering exchanges to them as outlined below.

3. Expand citizen diplomacy exchanges — to the United States and other countries — so that individuals in countries vulnerable to or experiencing CCP influence can see the fruits of democracy first-hand

Messaging only goes so far. To maximize impact and probability that leaders in affected states adopt democracy over autocracy, these individuals should experience what success looks like first-hand. Citizen diplomacy exchanges have the short-term benefit of exposing participants to democratic practices they can apply in their own countries. Longer-term, given the accomplished profile of many participants, they can help cultivate future leaders with favorable views not only of democratic governance but also of the United States. More than 500 current or former heads of government participated in the U.S. International Visitors Leadership Program (IVLP).²²

The benefits of such programs are not lost on the CCP. Recognizing the importance of projecting the perks of one's preferred governance model, China has accelerated efforts to train the next generation of developing country stakeholders — including party officials, journalists, civil society activists, and government officials — on the CCP's authoritarian approach to governance.²³

The United States should continue programs like IVLP, but also expand upon them by including visits to other democratic countries. We described above the benefits of highlighting examples of democratic success that may have more relevance for target country audiences as a diplomatic tool. The United States can also help to cultivate sustained relationships between democratic actors by bringing together emerging leaders from target countries to meet with and learn from their peers in societies that have more recently achieved democratic successes, for example by bringing stakeholders from Myanmar to Taiwan. These third-country exchanges can help achieve three goals: they can reinforce the role of the U.S. as the connective tissue of a global democratic movement; they support the building of networks between like-minded rising leaders; and they underline the idea that democracy is not a one size fits all model, but can and has been tweaked to suit specific country and cultural needs.

CONCLUSION

The United States spends 0.1% of its federal budget on foreign assistance. Whether or not the current level of spending is the right one, even more ambitious democracy promotion programs will be *relatively*

inexpensive in comparison to defense and economic aid. This is a domain where we can certainly afford to compete and where we cannot afford not to.

Leaving aside debates over whether to increase this number in aggregate, the U.S. government can do more with the resources already in hand to counter the CCP's efforts to leave America in the dust and reshape the global order in its image.

The CCP's tactics are only effective in a vacuum. As ever, there is a reservoir of unmet desire for democratic, citizen-centered solutions to serious governance challenges around the world. Publics want accountable leaders, transparency, prosperity, and to preserve their independence rather than the consequences of growing reliance on Beijing.

The CCP's influence tactics and efforts to popularize authoritarian governance methods have not altered this truth, and China's aggressive information operations and coercive diplomacy during the pandemic are causing alarm bells to ring in many countries regarding the nature of the CCP and the risks of unrestricted engagement with Beijing. Now is the time to demonstrate renewed U.S. leadership in defense of democracy, working with our allies to redouble commitment to helping countries shore up their own democracies, on their own terms, and in the process counter China's anti-democratic aims that threaten U.S. interests.

As we noted above, the recommendations in this paper apply globally. We have observed that countries with weaker internal checks and balances are more vulnerable to cooptation by the CCP. When democracy promotion and protection is elevated strategically as part of U.S. foreign policy, American efforts should extend to ensure that China's 1.4 billion people have the same opportunities to rights protection, to access independent information, and to hold leadership accountable — and ultimately to have the freedom to choose those leaders who best represent their needs. To that end, in addition to continuing strong support for Taiwan, the United States should be actively holding the CCP to account, pushing back against its repression in Hong Kong and mass abuse of human rights in Xinjiang.

Military might and economic leverage are necessary to compete with China but not sufficient to win the real competition — over how countries across the world govern themselves. To influence these decisions, the United States needs a democracy promotion strategy.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Emilie Kimball and Ted Reinert edited this paper, and Rachel Slattery provided layout.

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