

Policy Solutions

Continue the Freedom Agenda (Daniel Runde)

Freedom and human rights were part of the first Trump Administration and should be part of a second Trump Administration as well.

There has been a notable reduction of enthusiasm among conservatives for the democracy and human rights project over the past decade. “Human rights” seems to now be associated with favored issues by the Left, while the brand “democracy promotion” was negatively impacted by the outcomes of U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, some conservatives have cooled toward these terms.

Nevertheless, it remains in U.S. interests to support democracy and human rights in efforts to have a freer world and a growing number of societies that treat all people with dignity. It is less appreciated that our adversaries work better with fellow authoritarian societies, so a larger number of free societies means a safer world for the United States and its allies.

The “no-limits” partnership between the PRC and Russia⁴⁸ notably metastasizes in countries with weak governance, where corruption thrives, and without a free press to hold authorities accountable to the people. In particular, Russia works best with authoritarian nations like Iran, Venezuela, Nicaragua, North Korea, and the PRC. Belarus welcomes Putin to build new nuclear sites and conduct invasions against Ukraine from within Belarus’ borders. The PRC is also more likely to establish dual-use military bases and export its brand of techno-authoritarianism to more vulnerable countries. In addition to military in Djibouti and Cambodia, the PRC is reported to be pursuing a greater military presence elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Authoritarian human rights violators aid in the expansion of our greatest competitors and adversaries, indicating that a key component of geopolitical competition against Russia and the PRC centers around democracy and human rights.

48. REUTERS. PUTIN TO VISIT CHINA TO DEEPEN 'NO LIMITS' PARTNERSHIP WITH XI. [WWW.REUTERS.COM/WORLD/PUTIN-VISIT-CHINA-DEEPEN-NO-LIMITS-PARTNERSHIP-WITH-XI-2023-10-15/](https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-visit-china-deepen-no-limits-partnership-with-xi-2023-10-15/)

It may seem like the cards are stacked against the U.S. in this challenge. The democracy agenda is clearly at a difficult moment. According to Freedom House, global freedom declined for the eighteenth consecutive year in 2023. Many will see “democracy recession” as “proof” that supporting democracy “does not work” or of something we should quit. For example, critics argue that Russia and Iran will “always be” authoritarian “so why bother encouraging a free press, rule of law, or moving toward a more democratic system, especially in states vulnerable to Russian coercion?”

History informs us that the status of world affairs is not permanent. In his book “The Case for Democracy,” Israeli politician and former Soviet political prisoner Natan Sharansky argues that authoritarian regimes are more fragile on the inside than they look on the outside. The idea that communism in the Soviet Union would collapse would have been preposterous to most during the height of the Cold War, yet the Berlin Wall is now a historical relic. American policymakers should work for better days for human freedom and believe that we will see a freer world in the future. The foundations that free markets and rule-of-law systems provide in society are proven as the best forces to combat the tools of malign actors, in this case, Russia. Good governance is also foundational to greater transparency, which increases economic and commercial ties, creating further opportunities for American business.

The examples set by the Reagan administration and the ⁴⁸Trump administration demonstrate that there is a place in a Republican foreign policy for democracy promotion, especially to combat Vladimir Putin’s authoritarian agenda.

President Reagan launched the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in 1984, creating a network of institutions that have led the U.S. government’s efforts to combat authoritarianism and promote good governance abroad. Importantly, President Reagan and NED recognized that this work would take many decades. If we compare the levels of human freedom from 1984 when the NED started working to 2024, the world has become an objectively freer, more just place, and much of this improvement is because of President Reagan’s vision and the efforts of the United States.

President Reagan, joined by Pope John Paul II and Margaret Thatcher, played an important outside role in precipitating the fall of the Soviet Union. This was a world-changing, historic accomplishment.

Similarly, the Trump administration also championed a pro-democracy agenda against Russia. For instance, Ambassador John Sullivan and then-Secretary Mike Pompeo called for a swift and thorough investigation of leading anti-Putin activist Alexei Navalny's poisoning. President Trump imposed sanctions and called for the closure of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to prevent Russia from gaining further leverage over America's NATO allies. His administration also brokered economic normalization between Serbia and Kosovo, bolstering peace in the Balkans, a neighboring region vulnerable to Russian malign influence. U.S. support for the Three Seas Initiative catalyzed economic development in Central and Eastern Europe.

A future administration should work to expand on the Trump administration's efforts. Given the crackdown on opposition parties and figures within Russia and its periphery, the United States should empower civil society and support their democratic aspirations, with a focus on dissidents within Russia and Belarus. We should encourage American members of Congress to highlight the plight of the region's anti-Putin dissidents, notably those held as political prisoners. Where censorship is prevalent, the U.S. should also ensure we are providing civil society with tools to circumvent these firefalls, similar to existing⁴⁸ U.S. efforts in other closed societies like Cuba and China. Conservatives should be very familiar with standing up against censorship, as conservatives have taken a leadership role in pushing back against unfair and biased media outlets.

The U.S. should also support independent media in developing countries, just as conservatives value ensuring viewpoint diversity in the United States. If we did not have conservative talk radio, the conservative blogosphere, and conservative media, where would conservatives be in the United States?

A freer world protects U.S. economic and security interests. The United States has played such a role and conservatives have often taken up this cause. Given past performance, it is critical that a future administration adopts policies that support democracy and human rights including in places that some might not expect such as Russia.