



Forum for American Leadership

Supporting the Fight for Freedom Abroad as a Source of American National Security

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The world has shifted to a renewed era of great power competition. As in the great contests of the 20th century—against Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union—this competition is one not only of military might but also of ideals and values. China and Russia, America’s greatest strategic adversaries, both repress their own peoples and conduct or threaten authoritarian aggression against their neighbors. Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin have declared their intention to build a world safe for autocracy by dismantling the free and open order led by the United States. If America’s great-power adversaries see strategic advantage in assaulting democracy and democratic alliances, the United States should see strategic advantage in defending and advancing freedom around the world.

Why should the United States support democracy abroad?

- 1. It is cost effective.** Strengthening democratic institutions and supporting grassroots democrats abroad is one of the most cost-effective uses of American foreign assistance dollars. Societies that are responsive to the needs of their citizens and accountable to voters are more peaceful and stable. As former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis stated, “If you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately.” Secretary Mattis also pointed out to the International Republican Institute that where U.S. democracy assistance succeeds, “my Marines don’t need to fight.” In Ukraine, we are seeing the high cost that authoritarian aggressors can impose on the free world. The economic and strategic fallout from a Chinese assault on democratic Taiwan would be exponentially greater.
- 2. It is practical.** Nations with effective democratic institutions don’t invade their neighbors, produce uncontrolled mass migration of desperate refugees, germinate violent extremism, or proliferate nuclear weapons. The greatest dangers to American national security emanate from autocracies. Pro-democracy movements in Iran, Russia, Cuba, Venezuela, and Belarus, among others, provide a practical and compelling means of subverting America’s adversaries while simultaneously fostering human rights and democracy.
- 3. It is good politics.** [Recent polling](#) shows broad [U.S. public support](#) for standing with those around the world striving for freedom and democracy. The United States was founded by dissidents seeking to escape autocracy and build a democratic republic. Most Americans do not support an amoral foreign policy which makes no distinction between leaders who respect their citizens and leaders who oppress them. America won the Cold War in part because of its example of freedom. President Reagan’s support of freedom through groups like the National Endowment for Democracy, proved irresistible to citizens behind the Iron Curtain, who brought down the Soviet Empire. President

Obama's appeasement of dictators in Iran and China at the cost of American national security interests and President Biden's abandonment of Afghanistan and continuing outreach to Iran's murderous leaders are examples of the disastrous foreign policy consequences of abandoning universal values.

What can Congress do?

- 1. Support robust funding for democracy assistance in FY2024.** House Republicans have called for a return to Fiscal Year 2022 spending levels and an overall cut to foreign assistance. Even in this funding environment, House appropriators acknowledge the valuable role democracy assistance plays in supporting American national security goals. The proposed Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations bill released by House State and Foreign Operations Subcommittee Chairman Mario Diaz-Balart wisely proposes level funding for programs central to the fight for freedom, including the National Endowment for Democracy at \$315 million and the Democracy Fund at \$355 Million. While the Senate is also proposing cuts to foreign assistance, it should support the House's effort to keep democracy assistance a priority by maintaining strong funding levels.
- 2. Continue to support U.S. assistance to frontline democracies including Ukraine and Taiwan.** The United States Congress has appropriated \$113 billion in security, economic and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine since Russia's invasion in February of 2022. While this amount of aid is unprecedented, the war in Ukraine represents the front lines in the battle between autocracy and democracy. Polling by the [Reagan Institute](#) shows that 76% of Americans, including supermajorities of both Republicans and Democrats, say that it is important to the United States that Ukraine wins the war against Russian aggression. Supporting Ukraine is a cost-effective way to defeat Putin's efforts to reconstitute a Russian empire that threatens America, just as resolutely supporting Taiwan is essential to deterring Chinese aggression in Asia.
- 3. Issue statements of support for democratic movements, meet with democratic dissidents fighting to turn their countries from enemies into friends of America, and spotlight autocratic abuses where they occur.** While statements, tweets and speeches may seem trivial in the face of brutal oppression and crackdowns, time after time dissidents and former political prisoners speak of the difference such gestures can make—not only in their treatment at the hands of their captors, but also as a source of inspiration and motivation to sustain their struggle.

This paper is a product of the Forum for American Leadership's [Freedom and Democracy Working Group](#).

The Forum for American Leadership (FAL) is a non-profit organization that presents expert analysis and national security recommendations to policymakers in Congress and the Executive Branch.

