Issue 2: Should Promoting Democracy Abroad be a Top U.S. Priority?

Yes: McFaul, Michael. 2010. *Advancing Democracy Abroad: Why We Should and How We Can.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

No: Simes, Dmitri. 2003. "America's Imperial Dilemma." *Foreign Affairs* 82(6): 91-102.

Learning Outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

- Understand the relationship between democracy and peace.
- Explain the potential benefits to the United States of having a greater number of democracies in the world.
- Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of various approaches to democracy promotion, including the use of military force.
- Understand arguments against American promotion of democracy in other countries.
- Describe the costs, challenges, and risks associated with democracy promotion.

Issue Summary

Yes: Michael McFaul, professor of political science at Stanford University and U.S. Ambassador to Russia, argues that American security, economic, and moral interests have been enhanced by the spread of democracy throughout the globe. By focusing on a variety security threats emanating from autocratic regimes, as well as the security and economic benefits of close relationships with other democracies, McFaul makes a comprehensive case that democracy promotion should remain a major priority of U.S. foreign policy.

No: Dimitri K. Simes, President of the Center for the National Interest and publisher of *The National Interest,* argues that America's efforts to impose its utopian democratic vision on the rest of the world severely harm the country's long-term interests. Contending that America's dangerous imperial overreach threatens its exercise of power, Simes concludes that a return to a pragmatic and realistic foreign policy – one without democracy promotion – is the only way to maintain America's ability to lead in the world.

The question of whether the spread of democracy around the world enhances U.S. national security has become one of the most hotly contested debates of the post-Cold War era. While few would doubt that having a greater number of stable democracies in the international system would ultimately make for a safer world, the question of whether the United States should take an active role in promoting democracy in authoritarian countries enjoys no such

consensus. As this brief review will show, there is a broad range of viewpoints on the subject, ranging from those that advocate active democracy promotion -- with military force if necessary – to those that reject such efforts as ineffective, wasteful, and even potentially dangerous to U.S. national security interests. Between those extremes lie several nuanced positions that offer variations on support and criticism of the means, methods, and motives behind democracy promotion as a top priority for U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century.

The cornerstone of the argument in favor of placing democracy promotion as a top priority for American foreign policy is the now well-known observation that no two democracies have ever fought a war against each other. This phenomenon, known as the "democratic peace," though only recently attracting the attention of policy makers, is in fact a very old concept with philosophical roots in the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant's famous 1798 essay, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,* was in many respects a proto-policy proposal for achieving peaceful relations among the states of the world. In this essay, Kant argued that "The Civil Constitution of Every State Should Be Republican" (Kant 2006), asserting that a country whose government was based on the principles of representation and division of power would be cautious in going to war. For, "if the consent of the citizens is required in order to decide that war should be declared," the state would be constrained by the very public that bears the costs of war (Kant 2006). A group of such republican states, gathered into the "federation of free states" that Kant describes in the essay, would interact peacefully in accordance with the "law of nations" wherein the freedom and sovereignty of all member nations are respected.

Kant's principles echo throughout the writings of the early 20th century's great liberal democratic standard bearer, Woodrow Wilson. This is especially true of Wilson's famous "Fourteen Points" speech, delivered to Congress in January 1918, wherein he laid out the tenets

that would govern a peaceful international order based on the principles of freedom, liberty, justice, and equality (Wilson 1918). Indeed, one might argue that Wilson was the first U.S. President to advocate the promotion of liberal democracy as a foreign policy objective, for in his view, the key to American security lay in the political transformation of the rest of the world (McFaul 2010, 75).

Working from the political philosophical foundations provided by Kant and Wilson, along with the empirical reality of the democratic peace, an entire sub-discipline of the study of international relations has sought to understand the precise mechanisms that lead to universally peaceful relations between the democracies of the world (Russett 2001). Two main schools of thought have developed in explaining just what it is about democracies that keeps them from settling their disputes through violence and warfare. The first argues that democratic culture and domestic norms of reciprocity and nonviolent dispute resolution are extended to fellow democracies because they too follow these same norms and share the same culture (Russett 1993, 35). The second argues that it is the structure and institutions of democracy – institutions such as separation of powers, representative government, elite accountability and turnover through elections, transparency, and a free press – that make the march to war in a democracy a slow, messy process with many veto points that takes place in full view of the public (Russett 1993, 40). With this slow process comes the benefit of additional time to resolve disputes between democracies through negotiation and bargaining rather than violence. Though the two explanations for the democratic peace – the cultural/normative model and the structural/institutional model – are analytically distinct, it is hard to verify empirically which version most accurately describes reality. In fact, it is likely that the two mechanisms operate simultaneously in mutually-reinforcing ways.

Regardless of *how* the democratic peace operates, it is no great conceptual leap from the basic empirical observation to important implications for American national security: if democracies don't go to war with other democracies, then a greater number of democracies in the world means fewer potential enemies. This calculus forms the backbone of Michael McFaul's argument in the selection included in this chapter, for "every foreign enemy has been a dictatorship. Autocracies, not democracies have attacked and threatened the United States…[N]o democracy in the world has been or is an American enemy. And all of America's most enduring allies have been and remain democracies"(McFaul 2010, 80, 102).

If it is clear based on this logic that America would be better off if there were more democratic nations in the world, what is far less clear is just how far the United States should go in promoting democratization in foreign countries and what means are acceptable in doing so. One end of the spectrum is demarcated by the school of thought known as democratic globalism, a school of thought that tends to find its adherents among the neoconservative movement. According to its proponents, "the spread of democracy is not just and end but a means, an indispensable means for securing American interests"(Krauthammer 2004, 15). Arguing that American security and power are enhanced by the spread of democracy, democratic globalists blend elements of realism and liberalism to arrive at a clear policy conclusion: the United States must take an active role in spreading democracy around the world through a variety of means including military force where necessary. However, as Krauthammer argues, "the danger of democratic globalism is its universalism, its open-ended commitment to human freedom, its temptation to plant the flag of democracy everywhere"(15). Thus, he proposes a somewhat less universalistic but equally assertive alternative known as democratic realism: "We will support democracy everywhere, but we will commit blood and treasure only in places where there is a

strategic necessity – meaning, places central to the larger war against the existential enemy, the enemy that poses a global mortal threat to freedom"(16). In other words, Krauthammer and his fellow democratic realists argue that the United States should engage in democratization and nation-building "where it counts"(16). The neoconservative view -- along with the belief that Afghanistan and Iraq in the heart of the Muslim world was where "it counts" – strongly shaped the policies of President George W. Bush. In his second inaugural address, President Bush made it clear what role democracy promotion played in American foreign policy: "The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world…So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in the world"(Bush 2005).

Throughout the last decade, there have arisen a multitude of criticisms in opposition to this assertion that the active spread of democracy throughout the globe should be a central goal of U.S. foreign policy. Perhaps most forceful is the challenge made by scholars and policy makers of the realist tradition in international relations. Realists see interstate relations driven by the eternal competition for power and security that is inherent in an anarchic international system (Mearsheimer 2001, 30-31). Some realists question the very existence of the democratic peace, arguing that the post-WWII peace among the world's democracies was driven not by the characteristics of democracy but rather the common existential threat posed by the Soviet Union (Farber and Gowa 1995, 124). But even those realists who do accept the idea of the democratic peace see the endless pursuit of utopian ideals across the globe as an ineffective, costly, and extraordinarily difficult pursuit of American neo-imperialism. Even worse, American efforts to actively democratize other countries risk producing an anti-American backlash that will only serve to harm national security, according to some realist thinkers. They also raise the thorny

problem of what to do when anti-American parties come to power through legitimate democratic means in newly democratized countries. These concerns generally characterize the views put forward by Dmitri Simes in the selection included in this chapter. Another strand of political science research has also suggested that while mature, stable democracies may not fight wars with one another, new (potentially weak) democracies and states undergoing transitions to democracy are actually *more* likely to fight wars than stable democracies or stable autocracies (Mansfield and Snyder 1995). Thus, the realists argue, democratization may actually increase the risk of domestic and international conflict in the short to medium turn, resulting in messy quagmires for involved states.

In another related line of criticism, some have argued that while democracy promotion is a worthy goal of U.S. foreign policy, it is not the only goal nor should it be the primary one. The former U.S. State Department Director of Policy Planning, Richard Haass, has argued that

> It is, however, neither desirable nor practical to make democracy promotion a foreign policy doctrine. Too many pressing threats in which the lives of millions hang in the balance…will not be solved by the emergence of democracy. Promoting democracy is and should be one foreign policy goal, but it cannot be the only or dominant objective. When it comes to relations with Russia or China, other national security interests must normally take precedence over concerns about how they choose to govern themselves (Haass 2005, 27).

Another critique similarly accepts the value of democracy promotion as a key U.S. priority but rejects the use of military force as a means of doing so (Windsor 2006). As Francis Fukuyama argued in a 2005 address to the Foreign Policy Association, "forcible regime change really creates as many problems as it solves because you are the primary agent that is pushing change and it is not any longer driven by the society…[U]nless the local people think they own the democracy that they are creating, it creates a lot of problems, and it creates resistance unless there is a clear moral basis for the American role"(Fukuyama 2005, 13). Less costly, but

potentially more effective means of democracy promotion include, according to Fukuyama, election monitoring, rhetorical and financial support for independent media, and support for civil society groups. Understanding the limits of the use of military force in establishing democracy in foreign countries, the late Lieutenant General William Odom wrote in 2004 that "a period of direct U.S. military rule followed by a few decades of continued military presence is the only way we can be reasonably sure that a Liberal regime will take root" when it is imposed from without (Odom and Dujarric 2004, 217). A vocal critic of the U.S. war in Iraq, Odom suggested that such an extended military engagement was far too costly than could be justified, particularly given the low probability of long-term success.

Odom goes on to argue that American policy makers need to "rethink the promotion of democracy in countries that have not yet achieved Liberal breakthroughs[1]"(Odom and Dujarric 2004, 217). Implicit in this recommendation is a final powerful critique of the idea that the United States can and should promote democracy around the world. This is the critique that democracy is not always suited to thrive in particular countries, especially when imposed from the outside. Just as a seed planted in barren soil will fail to take root and grow, so too will democracy struggle to survive in places where the conditions are not suitable for its success, according to this critique. One key condition that seems strongly correlated with successful democratization is a country's level of economic development. Though research has not found a strong correlation between economic development and the *onset* of democratic transitions, it has found a correlation between development and *survival* of democracy. To be precise, the historical record shows that no democracy has experienced an authoritarian reversal in a country

[1] Odom, like many other scholars of democracy, believed that the expansion of liberal rights and freedoms in a society were a necessary precondition for the success of formal democratic institutions such as elections. The establishment of formal democratic institutions in societies where liberal rights had not developed was unlikely to result in stable liberal democracy. Rather, he argued, it would produce "illiberal democracies," semi-authoritarian regimes, or other hybrid regimes caught between democracy and dictatorship.

where the real per capita income is greater than $6,000 (Przeworski et al 2000, 98). While there is no theoretically-based reason why $6,000 should be the 'magic number,' this robust empirical research demonstrates that democracy is much more likely to survive in wealthy countries than in poor ones. This implication therefore calls into question the efficacy of democracy promotion in poor countries that do not have the level of economic development necessary to sustain democracy (Fukuyama 2005; Rachman 2009, 123). In addition to poverty, such countries are also often characterized by a weak state, high levels of corruption, low levels of education, ethnic and other social cleavagas – all conditions that are likely to threaten democratic survival. Rather than attempting to inject democracy into places where it is likely to fail, Fukuyama argues, the United States and other democracy promoters have to "wait for a certain ripening" in semi-authoritarian countries (like Serbia, Georgia, or Ukraine) where a falsified election can serve as a focal point for domestic and international demands for democracy (Fukuyama 2005).

Scholars of democratization have also identified culture as an important factor that influences the probability of democratic survival (Fukuyama 2005). While such arguments run the risk of being overly deterministic, it would be equally problematic to argue that the history, norms, identities, and ideas that constitute 'political culture' play no role in shaping political regimes. Critics of American efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East often point to elements within Islamic political culture as evidence of an inhospitable democratic climate. Similar arguments have been made about supposed authoritarian values in some East Asian countries. The link between culture, values, and democracy (or authoritarianism) is hotly contested, highly controversial, and problematic on many levels. However, the argument that some cultures are unsuitable for democracy remains a common and powerful weapon in the arsenal of those who criticize U.S. democracy promotion in these countries.

Thus, it is apparent that there is a vigorous debate and wide range of views on the question of whether democracy promotion should be a top foreign policy priority for the United States. Some put the global spread of democracy at the very core of American national security interests, ready to use any means necessary to achieve that end. Others argue for the importance of promoting democracy but disagree over the appropriateness and effectiveness of various means of doing so. Still others question whether the United States should engage in any sort of active democracy promotion abroad given the costs, challenges, and risks of such a strategy. It is a question for which consensus is unlikely in the foreseeable future, suggesting that the debate over American-led democracy promotion will be contested by scholars and policy makers alike for many years to come.

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