

## Notes from Development Issues Committee Meeting November 12, 2020

This meeting centered on a presentation by Alex Thier, Co-Director of the Task Force on U.S. Strategy to Support Democracy and Counter-Authoritarianism and a Senior Democracy Fellow at Freedom House. Alex was previously employed by USAID in leadership roles in AFPAK and PPL and was also Executive Director of the London-based ODI.

Alex began by calling attention to a recent report he had authored for the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, titled “A Force for Good in the World: Placing Democratic Values at the Heart of the UK’s International Strategy.” (The report is available at <https://www.wfd.org/2020/07/29/a-force-for-good-in-the-world-placing-democratic-values-at-the-heart-of-the-uks-international-strategy>.) This report, prepared at a time that the UK aid agency, DFID, is being merged with FCO in a new FDCO, argues for putting democratic governance at the center of the UK approach to foreign policy, development, and national security. This would be pursued through an integrated strategy to defend established democracies and democratic institutions, support emerging and struggling democracies, and counter authoritarians.

After the Westminster report was published in July, Freedom House President Mike Abramowitz had asked Alex to lead a task force looking at how a similar approach might be put in place by the United States. The Task Force on US Strategy to Support Democracy and Counter Authoritarianism was launched in October, sponsored jointly by Freedom House, CSIS, and the McCain Institute. Alex Thier and Anne Witkowsky are the co-chairs. The press release on the Task Force is available at <https://freedomhouse.org/article/freedom-house-csis-and-mccain-institute-launch-democracy-task-force>.

It should be noted that the concerns that prompted the Westminster Foundation and the Freedom House/CSIS/McCain Institute initiatives, also are evident in a new report from the German Marshall Fund’s Alliance for Securing Democracy, “Linking Values and Strategy: How Democracies Can Offset Autocratic Advances,” published in October and available at <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/linking-values-and-strategy>.

Alex pointed out that President-elect Biden had indicated during the campaign an openness to increased emphasis on support for democracy in US foreign policy. He noted that in its next *Freedom in the World* report, Freedom House would report that 2020 was the 15<sup>th</sup> consecutive year in which the number of countries experiencing democratic decline outnumbered those where there had been progress. Rising authoritarianism was evident in many countries, including those such as China and Russia that are in positions to influence developments in other countries. At the same time, many countries were imposing restrictions on the exercise of protected civil and political rights, as is evident in Hong Kong. In this continuing trend, the world was becoming more hostile to US interests and values. Also, the line between foreign and

domestic politics was becoming blurred and it was necessary to address some issues at home as well as abroad.

The new Task Force is addressing the question of what the US should do about the current trends. It has established five working groups to examine interrelated dimensions of support for democracy. He briefly described them:

- **Pillars of democracy:** The US has invested in democratic institutions such as the media, civil society, parliaments, and elections for many years. And yet, the results are often disappointing. One idea is to develop a public-private model that can provide reliable financing for independent media. Another is to look for insights in the experience of countries that were not aid recipients to see what approaches beyond aid might be helpful.
- **Architecture and alliances:** President-elect Biden has called for a summit on democracy that would include consideration of civil society and corruption issues. Boris Johnson has proposed a group of ten major democracies (identities not yet known) that could be allied in joint efforts to promote democracy. These are examples of ideas about how to organize international support for democracy: who would participate and how would they operate?
- **Technology:** Technology has overtaken conventional systems to protect democracy. An example is the Chinese dissemination of surveillance technology that governments can use to identify critics and participants in civil society activities.
- **Corruption, kleptocracy, and state capture:** Corruption has been weaponized. It corrodes democracy and weakens public confidence in democratic values and practices.
- **Economic policy:** Economic policy needs to be aligned with political objectives. This requires coherent engagement by the various parts of the government. If democracy support is an objective of US policy, we need to think about the influential roles of the Department of Labor and the Department of the Treasury. Other economic issues include allocation of the aid budget, which tends to earmark popular programs and leave little for democracy development and the role of conditionality in aid and other aspects of foreign relations.

There followed a vigorous discussion session that built on questions and observations from those in attendance. Topics included:

- Whether the US has lost credibility on the subject of democracy after experiencing major problems with the practice of democratic governance at home;

- The lack of a universal definition of democracy and whether we can accept that there are models that are not the same as American democracy;
- The adequacy of efforts to examine the history of democracy promotion to see what we could learn about what has and has not worked;
- The challenge of respecting local ownership in the face of differing donor approaches within a country;
- The desirability of partnership at the community and municipality level rather than concentrating on national entities in capitals;
- The importance of prioritizing objectives, including the need to distinguish between short-term and long-term opportunities and challenges;
- The need to take into account whether USAID is capable of working effectively on these issues and whether there is a role for mentorship by retired agency experts to help rebuild the needed institutional capacity;
- How USAID would best be organized to address these issues – including the integration of democratic governance across the entire country portfolio.
- How best to organize interagency democracy work so that USAID is participating as a collaborator rather than seen as a resource with little to contribute to policy;
- How to assess the reasons for the continuing democratic backsliding around the world, including the differences between global trends (such as a globalizing economy that leaves some behind) and local development, which are always prominent.
- How to make the most of evidence of increasing demand for democratic governance in civil society activism, as in Thailand.

As the time was expiring, a question was raised about whether there might be an opportunity to offer further thoughts to Alex for possible consideration by the task force. Alex responded that he would welcome suggestions, which could be sent to his email address: [jalexanderthier@gmail.com](mailto:jalexanderthier@gmail.com).