

# WHAT'S NEXT

*Policy Recommendations from the George W. Bush Institute*

January 2023 · [BushCenter.org](https://www.BushCenter.org)



## DEMOCRACY

*Why America Must Lead to Strengthen Democracy Worldwide*



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# DEMOCRACY:

## WHY AMERICA MUST LEAD TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY WORLDWIDE

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*Chris Walsh, Director, Freedom and Democracy*

By virtue of its political and economic might, the United States is uniquely positioned to champion the cause of freedom around the world. Doing so directly benefits Americans because free societies are more likely to engage in commerce, respect the rule of law, create pluralistic cultures that promote tolerance, and foster peaceful relations; they are less likely to go to war with each other. Democracy remains the best system for accountable, limited government while securing individual, political, and economic rights. And while U.S. leadership is critical for building a more democratic, prosperous, and peaceful world, America can't be alone in this struggle and must rally allies from Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and the Americas toward strengthening democracy worldwide.

### OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The White House and Congress must orient the United States and its allies toward winning the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism
- The White House and Congress must prioritize filling key leadership positions on democracy
- The executive branch must rally democratic allies to raise the costs to authoritarian actors for attacking democratic institutions, individual liberties, and human rights

American leadership, acting in concert with democratic allies, must counter the threats posed by rising authoritarian powers for the sake of global security and prosperity. The best way to do this is by supporting accountable democracies that respect the rule of law and protect the rights of their people.

Presently, Beijing, Moscow, and others seem to doubt Washington's commitment to supporting democratic ideals.

Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine is emblematic of this point and demonstrates the willingness of tyrants to test the resolve of America and its allies. It's not coincidental that President Vladimir Putin launched his attack on Kyiv soon after the United States' chaotic exit from Afghanistan or at a time when support for the NATO alliance was being publicly questioned by former political leaders.

Meanwhile, President Xi Jinping has overseen China's rise as an influential global power through initiatives like [Belt and Road](#) – an ambitious infrastructure project connecting China to world markets – and offered its authoritarian system as an alternative to democracy. This is the same system that deploys draconian surveillance and censorship technology against its citizens, implements genocidal policies on the Uyghur people, erases Hong Kong's autonomy, coerces American corporations, attacks various religious and ethnic minorities, and threatens Taiwan.

More broadly, Freedom House has [recorded](#) 16 consecutive years of decline in civil and political rights globally and has determined that nearly 80% of the global population lives in a country that isn't free. Over the past two years, we've witnessed the return of a military junta in Burma and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Regimes in North Korea and Iran continue brutalizing their people while developing nuclear weapons. Democracy in Venezuela has collapsed and been replaced with dictatorship. Democratic backsliding has occurred in countries like Hungary, India, Tunisia, and Turkey. Syria descended into a civil war that saw President Bashar Assad, aided and abetted by Russia's Putin, use chemical weapons against his own people.

Most Americans want Washington to stand with those fighting for their freedom, according to a national poll [conducted](#) by HarrisX in November 2022 for the George W. Bush Institute and Freedom House. Fifty-four percent of voters believe the United States should support activists in Iran, 61% support providing weapons and other assistance to Ukraine, and 59% back U.S. government officials visiting Taiwan, even at the risk of increased diplomatic tensions with China.

American presidents and other leaders have often evoked the cause of freedom and the empowering of oppressed peoples as a calling of the United States. And the pursuit of such a noble mission has not been owned by one political party or the other. Both historically and today, America's commitment to strengthening democracy globally has been bipartisan.

Beyond the presidency, Congress has recently displayed bipartisanship in support of freedom, democracy, and human rights abroad. Examples like the North Korean Human Rights Act, passed and reauthorized several times under the George W. Bush, Obama, and Trump Administrations; the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act; and the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act remind us that Americans of various political stripes are united in their support for liberty worldwide.

That said, this work is not the sole responsibility of the United States. Rallying allies from all corners of the globe and coordinating policy to advance freedom and democracy are crucial to success.

Such efforts do not mean that democracies should impose "Western" values on foreign populations. On the contrary, people from diverse countries, races, ethnicities, and religions want to make decisions about their own lives. They are best served when the United States and others stand strong in support of the universal desires for freedom that help humans flourish.

While the United States should exercise humility by recognizing its own shortcomings, it must also be confident in the democratic ideals that have allowed this Nation to course correct and work toward a more equal and just society. Activists struggling for their freedom understand that the United States is not perfect, but that it perpetually pursues ideals of liberty and justice. That inspires them. For example, in 2019, Hong Kongers protesting Beijing's efforts to exert control over their city brandished American flags and looked to the United States for support.

### *The White House and Congress must orient the United States and its allies toward winning the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism*

Winning the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism requires the United States and other democracies to acknowledge that they are engaged in a battle over the systems that will shape the global order. Certainly, the rhetoric and actions of authoritarian leaders like Xi and Putin make it clear they view this conflict as existential.

It is incumbent upon our political leaders in both the executive and legislative branches to make this case to the American people and to other free nations. Creating regular platforms to convey solidarity with and highlight the struggles of democracy activists, dissidents, and political prisoners from around the world is an important step that can be acted upon immediately. In

doing so, our leaders must connect how winning struggles for freedom in foreign lands affects security, liberty, and prosperity at home.

Practically, that means welcoming more activists to the Oval Office for publicized meetings with the president, as well as key diplomatic and national security officials, to boost the activists' profiles, humanize their struggle for audiences in free societies, and show solidarity with the fight for freedom worldwide. The Bush Institute's *Democracy Talks* series highlights several of these brave activists, including Venezuelan [Leopoldo Lopez](#), Uyghur-American [Rushan Abbas](#), and Hong Konger [Joshua Wong](#).

It also means using the presidency to regularly communicate with the American people on how the liberal democratic order has provided seven decades of relative peace and prosperity. The administration should explain how investments in defensive alliances like NATO deter aggression from authoritarian powers and contribute to international stability and elaborate on how this rules-based order protects the rights of American individuals and companies abroad while providing access to new markets and cultural exchanges.

The Biden Administration also has a unique opportunity to leverage the Year of Action and its second Summit for Democracy planned for 2023 to craft a unifying vision for democracies across the world. It should use this convening to set a meaningful agenda for how democracies deal with rising authoritarianism. This might include drafting a declaration of principles for supporting democracy abroad or outlining joint responses, possibly based on the experience of Ukraine, to be taken against continued authoritarian aggression – for example, an invasion of Taiwan.

For its part, Congress – through the House Foreign Affairs and Senate Foreign Relations committees as well as bodies like the Lantos Human Rights Commission and the Helsinki Commission – can further elevate democracy activists. Congress can do this through regular hearings that call activists as witnesses and meetings with staff that inform legislation aimed at curbing authoritarian abuses.

Additionally, Congress should continue using its oversight powers to highlight authoritarian intrusions into our democracy – like election interference, [transnational repression](#) that targets dissidents within our borders, and security concerns over social media platforms like TikTok that could be [exploited](#) by regimes to harvest data on American citizens. Congress must also ensure that our government's responses to such challenges are both adequate and robustly funded.

### *The White House and Congress must prioritize filling key leadership positions on democracy*

America's adversaries can't be expected to take U.S. policy on supporting democracy seriously if Washington isn't making it a priority. The White House and Congress must overcome longstanding stagnation in appointing and confirming key personnel responsible for implementing such policy. Two years into the Biden Administration, there is still no Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. While the current administration nominated a candidate, there was no confirmation. The Trump Administration didn't fill the position until its third year in office.

The Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights – another key position, which is mandated by law in the North Korean Human Rights Act – has remained vacant since 2017.

If these vacancies and others like them remain, they signal to authoritarian regimes that the United States only pays lip service to democracy and human rights as opposed to making them cornerstones of foreign policy. Moreover, it sends a message to our allies, as well as dissidents around the world, that the United States is reluctant to lead on the cause of freedom.

Congress and the White House must act immediately to fill these positions. Stable leadership

is crucial to departments responsible for carrying out U.S. policy on democracy and human rights. That in no way disparages the work of capable professionals who are serving in the interim, but such practice can't be a long-term substitute for having the appropriate personnel in place conferred with the legitimacy of executive appointment and congressional approval.

*The executive branch must rally democratic allies to raise the costs to authoritarian actors for attacking democratic institutions, individual liberties, and human rights*

If authoritarian powers believe they can attack democracies – including their institutions and citizens – and abuse human rights with impunity, their violations will become bolder and more egregious. While strong militaries must remain part of the equation, additional capabilities beyond force must be developed as deterrence.

The U.S. State Department should make it a strategic objective to encourage and expand the adoption among as many democratic allies as possible of Global Magnitsky Act-style legislation; the U.S. act authorizes direct sanctions against foreign individuals complicit in corruption and human rights abuses. Moreover, the secretary of state should personally coordinate with the executive and legislative branches – as well as counterparts at the departments of Defense and Homeland Security – to ensure their networks and platforms are being leveraged toward this goal.

A global “Magnitsky network” willing to consistently apply targeted sanctions would close the space where human rights abusers could find loopholes and financial and recreational safe harbors. The triggers for these sanctions should be broad and expansive, including but not limited to denying individual rights and liberties detailed in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, violations of democratic norms and institutions, transnational repression, malign influence campaigns in other nations (such as election interference), and violations of another country's sovereign territory.

American leadership could also utilize existing, values-based multinational organizations, like NATO, to jointly coordinate the implementation of targeted sanctions with other member states.

The president and secretary of state should leverage these same networks to deny authoritarian powers opportunities for international prestige. American leadership could coordinate with democratic allies to pressure international and regional sports competitions, such as the Olympics or World Cup, to consider boycotting countries like China, Russia, or Iran that are implicated in systemic human rights abuses.

Similarly, a coalition of democracies could jointly refuse to participate in competitions hosted by authoritarian countries. A significant show of unity could convince international sports committees to reconsider awarding high-profile games to nations with dubious human rights records.

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The United States must remain resolute in its commitment to supporting freedom and democracy. If America relinquishes its global leadership, authoritarian actors will move to fill the vacuum. They will shape a world order that prioritizes their power over dignity, peace, and prosperity. And left to their own devices, autocrats have shown they're not content to suppress the rights of their own people, but also those of populations beyond their borders. As it has done historically, America, in collaboration with its democratic allies, must rise to meet these threats posed by authoritarianism and stand for liberty.





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