

Rethinking Democracy Promotion and Nationalism

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COMMENTARY



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The first decade of the 21st century called into question the United States' capacity to advance freedom and democracy abroad. The century's second decade has provoked controversy about the relation between nationalism and liberal democracy. Greater attention to the preconditions for and impact of freedom and democracy, and to the persistence and varieties of nationalism, would contribute to the formulation of a foreign policy for the third decade of the 21st century that would be more suitable to U.S. interests and principles.

The primary reason President George W. Bush authorized the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq was to search out and destroy dictator Saddam Hussein's supposed stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction and his programs for producing them. A protracted and largely fruitless hunt for WMD followed the swift U.S. military victory. Bush's November 2003 speech on the

occasion of the National Endowment for Democracy's 20th anniversary marked a shift in the administration's focus from the threat posed by WMD to the threat posed by dictatorship, and from the goal of disarmament to the goal of promoting democracy.

Iraq's descent into sectarian warfare and the emergence first of al Qaeda and then of ISIS persuaded many Americans — on the left and the right — that the United States had little prospect of establishing free and democratic institutions abroad. The dashed hopes of the 2011 Arab Spring strengthened such skepticism. The war in Afghanistan, launched in 2001 in response to the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States and not yet concluded, further reinforced the conviction that the United States has no special gift for implanting freedom and democracy in foreign soil.

Meanwhile, in the last decade the West has witnessed a resurgence of nationalist sentiment. Its powerful appeal within the democratic world can be seen in President Trump's determination to put America's interests first; in Brexit supporters who want Britain to regain control over decisions about its commerce and borders; and in the ascent of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has warned that the immigration policy imposed by the Brussels bureaucracy "endangers our way of life, our culture, our customs and our Christian traditions." Moreover, a number of intellectuals — prominent among them Yoram Hazony, author of "The Virtue of Nationalism" — have argued that respect for a people's shared traditions, language, and sense of political unity and destiny provides the solid foundation for both a just and stable domestic politics and a just and stable international order.

Resistance to the claims of nationalism, however, remains strong in the West among academics, pundits, diplomats, and most of the left. They equate dedication to the national spirit with racism, internal repression, chauvinism, xenophobia, and imperialism. Encouraging the beliefs and practices that make peoples separate and distinct, they argue, is inherently divisive — contrary to the universal values to which all individuals and countries should be dedicated — and a sure recipe for perpetual war.

To properly evaluate America's interest in freedom and democracy abroad and the benefits as well as costs of nationalism it is useful to study these political ideas and institutions in action. This is among the accomplishments of my friend Michael Mandelbaum's new book, "The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth." Writing with a rare combination of equanimity and incisiveness, Mandelbaum shows that while the spread of freedom and democracy around the globe has been very much to America's advantage, the United States is poorly equipped to foster the cluster of norms, habits, and institutions on which they depend in the authoritarian states currently destabilizing the international order. Mandelbaum's larger argument, moreover, indicates that the fundamental question about nationalism concerns whether the traditions to which leaders appeal and to which the people respond supplement and fortify liberal democracy or conflict with and enervate it.

A professor emeritus at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Mandelbaum examines the “singularly peaceful quarter century” from roughly the collapse of communism — with the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union two years later — to the closing years of the Obama administration. The “deep peace” of the post-Cold War era, according to Mandelbaum, was marked by the steep decline of what political scientists call “security competition” — that is, the struggle for primacy among nations that has been a defining feature of international affairs since the dawn of history. For the better part of 25 years, the major powers were not only refraining from fighting. They were also not preparing for war because they did not see an advantage to military conflict and did not feel vulnerable to attack.

This unprecedented historical moment — by most any reasonable comparative or empirical measure the most peaceful and prosperous quarter-century the world has seen — rests on three pillars, according to Mandelbaum. First, “benign American hegemony” provided security and stability to the international order. Unlike hegemons of the past, the United States has not sought to conquer, occupy, or govern other nations. Its aim by and large has been to oppose aggression, stabilize regions, and preserve international order. When its military mission ended, it left, or retained bases with the agreement of the sovereign power.

Second, the dramatic growth in economic interdependence under America’s benign hegemony profoundly altered nations’ incentive structure. In the years following the end of the Cold War, the costs of armed conflict to international trade and cross-border investment greatly exceeded any benefits that could be obtained through the violent acquisition of treasure and territory.

Third, and most importantly, the rapid spread during the last few decades of the 20th century of democracy — embracing both popular sovereignty and the protection of religious, political, and economic liberty — created conditions favorable to deep peace. “Democracy reduces the capacity for war by giving the public the means to check the sometimes-bellicose visions of their rulers,” argues Mandelbaum. “It also fosters a political culture of peaceful compromise.” Democracy doesn’t eliminate conflict, but democratic habits and institutions do nurture the belief that physical violence is the wrong way to resolve disputes and do foster the skills of negotiation and compromise.

The rise of three revisionist powers ended the post-Cold War deep peace. Russia in Eastern Europe, China in East Asia, and Iran in the Middle East have reignited security competition by embracing an “assertive” and “aggressive” nationalism designed to upend the status quo. Vladimir Putin in Russia, Xi Jinping in China, and the ayatollahs in Iran, along with the corrupt and oppressive ruling classes they lead, fear a loss of support stemming from a failure to meet their populations’ economic demands and from the worldwide appeal of democracy. In all three countries, dictators rallied their people and secured legitimacy by

appealing to a national pride and shared history that justified regional hegemony. “[A]ggressive nationalism,” Mandelbaum wryly observes, “is the tribute that dictatorship pays, in the twenty-first century, to democracy.”

The return of nationalist-fueled security competition in Eastern Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East does not discredit nationalism, much less freedom and democracy. It does provide an opportunity to rethink our premises and recalibrate our policies.

The United States has a vital interest in fostering a world that is freer, more democratic, and more open. Greater attention to the persistence of nationalism in its many varieties will enhance our appreciation of the limits to America’s ability to command the forces that promote freedom and democracy abroad — and of the importance of cultivating the beliefs and practices that strengthen liberal democracy at home.

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