



Back to Westminster: A new transatlantic agenda to defend democracy

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Abstract

Across the transatlantic area and, indeed, across the democratic world, democracy is under strain from domestic and external factors, while throughout the world, authoritarian and totalitarian forces continue to quash people's desire for freedom and human dignity. In this context, this article takes stock of the ongoing challenges, and argues for a renewed transatlantic agenda that returns to the spirit of President Ronald Reagan's 1982 Westminster Speech. It should achieve this by developing an ambitious programme that defends democracy within the transatlantic area and supports people's desire for freedom globally, while avoiding the dogmatic approaches and ossification that have characterised democracy promotion over the past two decades.

Keywords

Democracy, Reagan, Westminster, West, Freedom

Introduction

In 1982, at the height of the Cold War and the struggle between the Free World and Marxist totalitarianism, US President Ronald Reagan delivered a speech to the British Parliament during an official visit to Great Britain in which he outlined his vision for putting the Marxist dialectics in reverse, and supporting those who wished to live freely: 'The objective I propose is quite simple to state: to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities, which allows a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means' (Reagan 1982).

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The context in which President Reagan delivered his remarks was hardly favourable to such an endeavour. The country he was visiting was battling high inflation and unemployment at home, and Argentine forces in the South Atlantic; Islamic revolutionaries had overthrown the Shah of Iran three years earlier; the Sandinistas had taken over Nicaragua; Cuban troops were engaged in Angola; and the Solidarity movement was battling the dark days of martial law in Poland. Moreover, the Soviet empire, though economically in decline, was dominating Central and Eastern Europe, and spreading its influence from Afghanistan to Latin America.

Yet as British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1993, 258) noted, ‘the speech itself was a remarkable one’. According to her,

It marked a decisive stage in the battle of ideas which he and I wished to wage against socialism, above all socialism of the Soviet Union. Both of us were convinced that strong defence was a necessary, but not sufficient, means of overcoming the communist threat. Instead of seeking merely to contain communism, which had been the West’s doctrine in the past, we wished to put freedom on the offensive. (Thatcher 1993, 258)

Contrary to some misconceptions, this call to arms was not liberal internationalist in character but reflected a profoundly conservative outlook. It aimed to defend a historically proven social order, and traditions and institutions including peace, freedom, law, civility, public spirit, the security of property and family life. It was cautious about the pace of change, supported civil society against the totality of power and top-down interference, and indulged people’s *oikophilia*, that is, their inclination to cherish their home, family or nation.

Today, across the transatlantic area and, indeed, across the democratic world, democracy is under strain from domestic and external factors, while the desire for freedom and human dignity felt by people throughout the world continues to be quashed by authoritarian and totalitarian forces. In this context, this article takes stock of the ongoing challenges and argues for a renewed transatlantic agenda that returns to the spirit of the Westminster Speech. It should achieve this by developing an ambitious programme that defends democracy within the transatlantic area and supports people’s desire for freedom globally, while avoiding the dogmatic approaches and ossification that have characterised democracy promotion over the past two decades.

Just as in 1982, not simply defending but also supporting democracy around the world may seem overly ambitious. Indeed, it is. It is even more so at a time when the Free World lacks the leadership, moral guidance and vision of individuals such as Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher or Pope John Paul II. Nevertheless, as this article argues, such ambitions are also necessary when our own democratic societies are under assault both from within and from outside. As US Senator Marco Rubio (2021) recently warned, we may soon ‘live to see a future in which the world’s most powerful nation is a totalitarian genocidal Communist dictatorship.’ To defend democracy, and to see it flourish worldwide, a transatlantic agenda is necessary because the transatlantic space still

remains the bedrock of the Free World, capable of bringing democratic states across the world together in a commonwealth.

Defending democracy

As the Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research (2016, 3), a think tank of the British Army, soberly concluded: ‘At a national level, and without being overly alarmist, we should also start the process of preparing society for an era of confrontation that perhaps presents the greatest risk to our security and prosperity since the end of the Cold War.’

From the macro to the micro-level, the world order as we know it (or, perhaps, as we imagine it) is in flux. The term world order is often used to characterise the existing balance of power, hierarchy and ‘rules of the game’ underpinning world politics. However, what is and what constitutes such an order is contested (Merheim-Eyre 2019b, 27). According to Malcolm Chalmers (2019), this order is composed of three systems:

1. A universal security system that is embodied by the UN charter, and includes the right to self-determination, the inviolability of borders and so on.
2. A universal economic system that includes a set of international agreements and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the WTO. This also includes regimes to address climate change and global diseases. Its membership has grown over time to be almost universal.
3. A Western system, that is, a more exclusive community of shared political, economic and security interests in North America, Europe and the Asia-Pacific region.

As Chalmers (2019, 4) further notes, major power relations, such as the bloc system and the mutually agreed spheres of influence during the Cold War, exist independently but also have the ability to shape the three systems. Furthermore, for the English School of International Relations, and the late British international relations theorist Hedley Bull in particular, an order presupposes at least some degree of social relations, and acceptance (however minimal) of a set of shared rules and practices, such as the inviolability of borders between states. Bull sees institutions such as the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war and major powers as essential to producing order in the international system (including the universal security system and, to some extent, the universal economic system). Of the international system, Trine Flockhart (2016, 17) argues, that it ‘is likely to have some social attributes that are likely to be similar to those in an international society’. An international society, or a society of states, however, bears more resemblance to the Western system, which ‘exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions’ (Flockhart 2016, 17).

Indeed, it is these various systems, including the Western system, that are increasingly being challenged. For decades, the engagement of democracies within and beyond the Western system was based on two assumptions. The first was that growing interdependence between states and the modernisation of developing countries would bring about the economic and political transformation of countries outside the Western system (that is, by them being increasingly absorbed into the Western system, which was becoming confused with the universal system). The second was that it would create a more stable world order, and perhaps even lead to the disappearance of international anarchy.

Such was the premise even before the end of the Cold War, and the popularity of this idea accelerated after its end with the hope that once-totalitarian states might one day even become 'like us'. Today, the West faces a harsh reality. While Western democracies assumed that they were shaping far-flung parts of the world in their own image, they failed to notice that, instead of conforming to the Western model, some regimes have become increasingly oppressive and even totalitarian at home, while seeking to corrupt, weaken or even transform the three systems to suit their own interests.

For example, Vladimir Putin's Russia has become increasingly repressive at home, while perceiving itself to be in a war with the West. It accuses the latter of waging hybrid warfare against Russia, namely through democracy-support programmes for civil society, the free media and democratic opposition, and through what the Kremlin perceives as Western-orchestrated 'colour revolutions' in Russia's neighbourhood (McDermott 2016). Externally, Russia has been prepared to undermine the universal security system (as witnessed by its annexation of Crimea and waging of an undeclared war in eastern Ukraine), and to weaken and corrupt the Western system. It has increasingly been playing the role of a spoiler, and an unpredictable and reactionary power that preys on adversaries' weaknesses (see below).

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), on the other hand, is seeking to rewrite international norms (Richardson 2020). Furthermore, both the Kremlin and the CCP are exploiting the universal economic system and the Western system. The CCP achieves this in a variety of ways. For instance, the totalitarian regime in Beijing is using companies such as Huawei to build telecommunications networks globally that can give it a capability to disrupt communications and de facto spy on our citizens (Cerulus and Heikkila 2020). Furthermore, the Chinese economic system continues to be incompatible with WTO norms (Shea 2021), meaning that while it continues to benefit from the economic system, it does not offer the same level of openness to its own market. Finally, its companies continue to engage in widespread intellectual property theft, costing the US alone an estimated \$50bn annually (US, Office of the United States Trade Representative 2018), while using foreign investments and acquisitions to upgrade its domestic industries, ultimately, to degrade, reduce or replace Western competition in key sectors. If such actions are not addressed by Western countries, they will have an increasing impact on jobs and thus the very fabric of Western societies.

Meanwhile, Russian oligarchs and those friendly with the Kremlin launder dirty money through the City of London and other financial centres (Galeotti 2017). This exploitation has highlighted that, rather than the positive socialisation which Western pundits hoped would transfer the Western rules-based order to Russia, China and beyond, we have instead witnessed the corruption of the universal economic system and the Western system, and the undermining of the universal security system.

Unlike the CCP, the Kremlin does not have a predetermined strategy (Galeotti 2019, 15). Rather, according to Schaub Jr et al., the Russian form of hybrid warfare that has been waged against Western democracies in recent years seeks to undermine their resilience by ‘exploiting social, economic and political weaknesses’ in order to ‘produce instability that undermines social cohesion and exacerbates tensions . . . [and] reduce the ability of the target state to govern effectively or respond quickly and effectively in crises while avoiding clear and overt involvement’ (Schaub Jr et al. 2017, 33).

In some respects, Western democracies have been pushing back against these efforts from their adversaries. For example, the core US democracy-support institutes, including the International Republican Institute, have been leading responses to address disinformation and other hybrid tools by building up the capabilities of civil society and government institutions in Central and Eastern Europe (Merheim-Eyre 2019a; 2019c), while the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China has brought together parliamentarians from across the democratic world to address the CCP’s growing assertiveness. In a sign that the transatlantic community is also prepared to respond to the growing number of cyber-attacks from state and non-state actors, both the US and the EU have recently imposed targeted sanctions on the Russian officials identified as responsible for the operations. This was a particular milestone for the EU, whose member states remain divided on key issues of engagement with Russia, China and other authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, there is also the US-driven Clean Network initiative and the EU’s 5G Clean Toolbox, both of which seek to foster the development of safe 5G networks, while the US has been leading the way in protecting Western companies, for instance through the bi-partisan Protecting American Intellectual Property Act, which seeks to mandate sanctions on individuals and firms found to engage in, benefit from or enable intellectual property theft (US 2021).

While this may sound like a list of disparate measures, it rather highlights the scale of the challenges and vulnerabilities that Western democracies need to address. The openness of the Western system and globalisation, which for a long time was only seen in beneficial terms, have increasingly come to be manipulated by authoritarian regimes, with our societies, institutions, infrastructure and the economy increasingly being targeted.

But defending democracy goes beyond preventive measures. It requires a deeper political dialogue that is crucial to address many of the vulnerabilities facing Western democracies. Internally, for example, the Western system is being challenged by socio-economic tensions caused by globalisation, which are resulting in political discontent with the status quo (see Goodhart 2017). This, in turn, is being exacerbated by a form of progressivist ‘hyper-liberalism’, which claims universality and forces conformity with

its intellectual orthodoxy (Gray 2018), and populist forces which seek to challenge it (Mudde 2017).

Addressing such social fissures, and rebuilding social cohesion (especially while attempts to deepen divisions from both within and outside continue) will not be an easy task. Above all, it will require resolute leadership at a time when, from Berlin to Washington, DC, Western leaders are continuing to approach the defence of democracy timidly at best. Yet if the spirit of the Westminister Speech means anything, it is the ability of free societies to overcome their difficulties and to take freedom on the offensive. As Edward Lucas (2021) recently wrote:

But we can also choose to win. That is what Western leaders such as Margaret Thatcher, the two Helmut (Schmidt and Kohl), Ronald Reagan, and that wily Vatican brainbox knew. They took hard decisions and expressed their views with blazing moral clarity. The vast edifice of Soviet communism, based on fragile foundations of lies and fear, could not compete and crumpled.

Supporting freedom and democracy worldwide

Going on the offensive to promote freedom and democracy creates many ontological questions about democracy support. As noted earlier, President Reagan's vision of democracy support was not a liberal internationalist call to arms, but a profoundly conservative one. Thus, while both conservatives and liberals/progressives can agree on the importance of supporting those wishing to be free, the latter tend to have a more rationalist view of human nature and a more optimistic view of societal 'progress' through modernisation. Conservatives, by nature, tend to have a sceptical or, at the very least, a more cautious perception of human nature with all its contradictions (Merheim-Eyre 2020).

For this reason, supporting freedom and democracy worldwide must also take into account the pace of change. President Reagan (1982) in his Westminister Speech noted that 'we must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings'. However, he also cautioned against 'forcing the pace of change' (Reagan 1982). Jeanne Kirkpatrick, who served both on Reagan's National Security Council and as the US ambassador to the UN, also made this point: 'Hurried efforts to force complex and unfamiliar political practices on societies lacking the requisite political culture, tradition, and social structures not only fail to produce desired outcomes; if they are undertaken at a time when the traditional regime is under attack, they actually facilitate the job of the insurgents' (Kirkpatrick 1979).

Thus, while the thirst for freedom is a natural instinct, building, and indeed sustaining, democracy is not easy. Kirkpatrick notes the long and bumpy process it took in Britain to build a parliamentary democracy, let alone the difficult and bloody process in France. We can observe these same difficulties today in Central and Eastern Europe (a region often held up as an example of successful democratic transition), where the desire for freedom in 1989 led to the end of the Soviet empire, but also where 40 years of totalitarian rule

and the destruction of civic associations by the Communists continues to impact democratic governance.

This is also directly related to the question of how the democracy-support agenda should look. As Jakub Grygiel pointed out, the question of promoting our ‘values’ is a problematic one because, though we may all be able to name those values, we disagree on the substance, such as on ‘questions of life, marriage and death’ (Grygiel 2019). Grygiel further notes that we should not ‘confuse our respect for life and love of liberty with “progressive values”, which are not universally appealing and whose infinite and elastic meaning defined by individual preferences weaken our reputation and undermine our national security’ (Grygiel 2019).

Supporting those living under authoritarian or totalitarian rule by providing access to free media; providing technical assistance, as was the case with Solidarity in the 1980s; giving moral support to the oppressed; or imposing costs on those engaging in or enabling human rights abuses through Magnitsky Act-style sanctions or other mechanisms, should and must continue to be our priority. However, a progressivist understanding of values and what the philosopher John Gray (2019) calls an expanding ‘illiberal empire of rights’ has, in recent years, made its way into the democracy-support programmes of the US, the EU and some of its member states. This is problematic not only because of our differing views on the substance of these values, but because questions about what constitutes family or when life begins or ends must fundamentally be part of a domestic democratic process and compromise among citizens. Pushing dogmas without sensitivity for the given society can lead to discontent, divisions and even the delegitimation of our efforts (however genuinely intended). President Reagan (1982) too, argued that supporting freedom and democracy is not about ‘cultural imperialism’, but about ‘providing the means for genuine self-determination and protection for diversity.’

The problem, as former President of the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED) Carl Gershman (2019) noted, is not only that the expansion of democracy-support programmes has led to increasing bureaucratisation, but that programmes are often driven more by the priorities of the donors rather than by those of the people whom they seek to support. Also, though top-down programmes to support the building or reform of public institutions is important, especially in formerly authoritarian or totalitarian countries, there is a fundamental need to strengthen bottom-up programmes, such as those supported by both the NED and the European Endowment for Democracy.

A bottom-up approach to democracy support is crucial for sustainability, not least because a vibrant civic and civil society not only holds the state institutions to account, but is also fundamental to resisting any attempts by the state to curb civil liberties—which is one of the main reasons why they are the first target of any authoritarian or totalitarian regime seeking to impose itself. In this respect, it is important that donors do not simply rely on the large professional non-governmental organisations whose reach is often limited to the bigger cities (and which are often confused with ‘civil society’), but also support smaller local initiatives beyond the major cities. Although bottom-up

programmes such as those of the European Endowment for Democracy and the NED tend to be more successful in this regard, larger donors such as the European Commission ought to step up re-granting. This would ensure the greater and more active participation of civic and civil society, which is crucial for building thriving democracies and ensuring that people exercise their freedoms.

Conclusion

This article has sought to argue for a transatlantic agenda that returns to the spirit of President Ronald Reagan's 1982 Westminster Speech by developing an ambitious programme that defends democracy across the transatlantic area and supports people's desire for freedom globally, while avoiding the dogmatic approaches and ossification that have characterised democracy promotion over the past two decades.

To defend democracy, and to see it flourish worldwide, a transatlantic agenda is necessary because the transatlantic space remains the bedrock of the Free World, capable of bringing democratic states across the world together in a commonwealth. As such, common approaches, such as the recent coordination on sanctions against the CCP officials responsible for human rights abuses in Xinjiang (Lau 2021), are an important step in the transatlantic community's working together to stand with the oppressed against a cruel totalitarian regime.

The article has presented a long list of disparate measures, highlighting the scale of the vulnerabilities and challenges that Western democracies need to address, whether it be cleaning up our communications networks, supporting value chains, protecting businesses and people's livelihoods, fighting kleptocracy and disinformation, or addressing our social fissures.

Such tasks may sound daunting and, at a time when Western democracies seem to be facing a crisis of confidence, perhaps even illusory. Yet if anyone can overcome them it is, as Ronald Reagan (1982) believed, 'free people, worthy of freedom and determined not only to remain so but to help others gain their freedom as well.'

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