

Democracy Promotion in a Challenging World

TESTIMONY OF: Daniel Twining, **President**

Introduction

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, distinguished Members of the Committee, it is my pleasure to testify before you today on the topic of democracy promotion in a challenging world.

Last month, the International Republican Institute (IRI) had the privilege of honoring Secretary of Defense James Mattis and UN Ambassador Nikki Haley at our annual Freedom Award dinner, for a truly inspiring evening that we were pleased Chairman Royce could join us to celebrate. In his remarks, Secretary Mattis shared an observation that speaks to the heart of what we mean when we talk about the importance of democracy promotion:

“I had many privileged glimpses into the human condition, but I never once saw human beings flee the freedom of speech; I never saw families on the run from the free practice of religion in the public square; and as a young Marine, I never picked anybody out of a raft on the ocean desperate to escape a free press. By nurturing democracies abroad, by sharing best practices in responsive, inclusive and just governance, IRI prepares the soil for that flourishing.”

Secretary Mattis is no one’s idea of a starry-eyed idealist. Through his decades of service in the military, he arrived at the conclusion that American power derives not just from our martial prowess, but ultimately from the democratic ideals that underpin and inform everything we do. In contrast, the societies that do not embrace those ideals inevitably create the problems that are driving some of the world’s most difficult challenges.

Today I will explore the irreplaceable role of democracy assistance in advancing U.S. strategic interests, focusing on four key threats: violent extremism, uncontrolled mass migration, the Kremlin’s hybrid warfare and Chinese sharp power.

CHALLENGE 1: COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Nearly 17 years after 9/11, we have grown more or less accustomed to the ever-present threat of terrorism, and we are all too used to seeing lives destroyed and nations torn apart by this scourge. As the Trump Administration’s National Security Strategy points out, violent extremist organizations “thrive under conditions of state weakness and prey on the vulnerable as they accelerate the breakdown of rules to create havens from which to plan and launch attacks on the United States, our allies, and our partners.” In order to successfully combat extremism, we must look to the source of the problem. Sobering experience has taught us that a kinetic response, while necessary, is not sufficient to

address violent extremism. We cannot simply fight our way out of this problem but must also look to preventative measures.

The dynamics that enable violent extremists to flourish are not just confined to the Middle East. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, violent extremists intentionally exacerbate the country's legacy of interethnic conflict to drive radicalization in vulnerable communities. In young democracies like Bosnia, the problems attendant with developing institutions and residual difficulties in bridging the gap between citizens and government can create feelings of hopelessness that drive some toward the illusory promises of violent extremism.

Our approach to this challenge must be multifaceted. Democracy assistance is a vital tool on the preventative side—helping to create the conditions in which populations that might otherwise be vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremists have peaceful outlets to express grievances and have a stake in their societies.

IRI carries out this work in 13 countries around the world—working in a variety of contexts and adapting our approach to local conditions. IRI's institutional approach builds on public opinion research and leverages our extensive relationships with political parties, government officials, and civil society groups to address the unique challenges faced in each country.

In Africa, IRI invests in building local community resilience by directly engaging with vulnerable populations—particularly youth—and supporting inter-religious dialogue that counters polarizing and extremist ideologies. In Tanzania, IRI's work includes engaging with youth, religious leaders and security organs to improve relationships, foster greater information sharing and build common understanding and partnerships that make communities more resilient to extremist threats. In Nigeria, the U.S. ambassador told me his greatest fear is that ISIS is defeated in Syria and Iraq only to reconstitute its self-proclaimed caliphate in northern Nigeria—but that IRI's work to give young people a voice in shaping Nigeria's future through political inclusion is one antidote to that risk.

Southeast Asia is another target for recruitment by ISIS and its affiliates, who seek to gain a foothold among vulnerable populations in countries where democratic deficits and interethnic rivalries present opportunities for radicalization. In Indonesia, terrorism, ethno-religious conflict and intolerance have undermined the country's democratic progress since the fall of Suharto 20 years ago. IRI conducts focused public opinion research to better understand both the vulnerabilities to violent extremism and sources of resilience in this country, with the aim of better equipping stakeholders in the government, political parties and civil society organizations with the tools they need to combat this threat.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, IRI is working to prevent violent extremism by strengthening democratic institutions, especially parliamentary caucus structures, and investing in programs that target the most vulnerable populations—namely, youth. We help strengthen institutions so that they can address the issues of greatest concern to citizens and reduce the sense of hopelessness that drives people to embrace terrorism. IRI’s Western Balkans Task Force on Violent Extremism has been helping legislators and government officials design effective policies to prevent and counter terrorism—including helping to design a law to cope with foreign fighters returning from Syria. We also bridge gaps between communities that have suffered from interethnic strife so that these divisions are not manipulated by extremists who thrive on nurturing grievances.

CHALLENGE 2: UNCONTROLLED MASS MIGRATION

We are in the midst of the most significant refugee crisis since the Second World War—creating monumental security and societal challenges and destabilizing entire regions, including not just conflict states in the Middle East but also our close allies in Europe. In our own hemisphere, uncontrolled mass migration fuels transnational crime, including human trafficking and the drug trade, as increasingly desperate populations flee the breakdown of law and order and governance in places like Venezuela and Central America in search of a decent life elsewhere.

The fallout from uncontrolled migration around the world for U.S. interests is enormous—undermining core security interests, weakening our allies, radicalizing new generations of young people, and costing billions in both direct humanitarian assistance and in the indirect problems caused by this destabilizing trend.

Any successful approach to this complex problem must address the drivers of mass migration, often caused by the failure of government institutions to provide the conditions in which people can live with security and provide for their families. Corruption, the breakdown of law and order and citizen insecurity are key drivers of mass migration.

IRI works with national and local governments and civil society organizations in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to strengthen the institutions that deliver security and key services so that people will be less likely to flee and more likely to build successful societies at home. IRI helps citizens, governments, and law enforcement authorities to address public safety needs, making citizens an integral part of the solutions to the problems they are trying to escape.

IRI has also worked with local governments in Guatemala to create Municipal Economic Development Offices (OMDELS) that help stimulate local economies. OMDELS provide

citizens with technical and vocational trainings that have enhanced workforce readiness, produced a job-seeker database to help recruiters fill employment vacancies, and helped to drive the creation of private businesses. If governments can provide a minimum of citizen security and opportunity to their citizens, they are less likely to want to come to the United States and more likely to invest in their own country's future.

CHALLENGE 3: KREMLIN HYBRID WARFARE

In his National Security Strategy, President Trump put the challenge we face from the so-called "return of geopolitics" starkly:

"China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests. China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor. Russia seeks to restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders."

Secretary Mattis' National Defense Strategy similarly warns that Russia and China both seek to export their authoritarian models in order to undermine U.S. leadership and the democratic world order the United States built with our allies after the Second World War.

America's authoritarian challengers merit separate consideration, so I will start by addressing the dangers posed by Russia's increasingly aggressive campaign of hybrid warfare. In Europe and beyond, the Kremlin is deploying a sophisticated information warfare campaign—including cybersecurity attacks on electoral systems and political parties and coordinated campaigns of disinformation—to undermine democratic institutions, exploit societal divisions, and erode citizens' confidence in democracy. Moscow's aim is to create an environment in which the post-war American-led democratic order is diminished and the Putin autocracy is free to continue stealing from its own people, deny the Russian people their basic rights, and extend its historical sphere of influence into the heart of Europe.

What makes this form of political warfare particularly insidious is that it uses some of the core features of our democracy against us—exploiting free media to manipulate and spread false information, and attempting to undermine confidence in our electoral systems. Our approach to this challenge must be to harness the strengths of democracy to expose these practices and create coordinated policies that push back against this campaign to subvert our open societies.

IRI has been combatting this problem for more than two years with the Beacon Project—one of the very first programs to track and mobilize political coalitions against Russian disinformation and meddling on European society. We have leveraged our vast and

established network of relationships with European political parties and civil society groups to create coordinated policy responses that tackle this problem and reinforce the transatlantic alliance and our shared values.

When IRI began this initiative, we set out to overcome two major deficits: the dearth of information about the extent and impact of disinformation and the lack of coordination among political and civil society stakeholders on this issue. Since then, the project has expanded its informal Beacon Network from a disparate collection of organizations working independently into a sustainable coalition of experts and political activists across Europe with access to policymakers at the EU and national levels. IRI has operationalized this network by training members in the use of our proprietary media monitoring platform, a digital tool called >versus<. This tool has enabled our local partners to track disinformation, propaganda, and other forms of media manipulation as a means of informing their policy and advocacy responses.

CHALLENGE 4: CHINESE SHARP POWER

As the National Endowment for Democracy’s recent report on the phenomenon of authoritarian “sharp power” explains,

“Over the past decade, China and Russia have spent billions of dollars to shape public opinion and perceptions around the world. This foreign authoritarian influence is not principally about attraction or persuasion; instead, it centers on distraction and manipulation. These ambitious authoritarian regimes, which systematically suppress political pluralism and free expression at home, are increasingly seeking to apply similar principles internationally to secure their interests.”

The Chinese government, led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), utilizes sophisticated tactics to build and wield political influence around the world, with the aim of challenging, and ultimately supplanting, America’s global dominance. China’s vast economic resources and its efforts to tout rapid economic development under strongman rule as an alternative model to Western democracy allows it to have a deep and often hidden impact in any given country.

The CCP’s authoritarian political model and the role of the state in steering Chinese economic engagement abroad for grand strategic purposes poses grave risks to smaller countries by pulling them into China’s orbit in ways that undermine political pluralism. In addition to authoritarian sharp power tactics, the Chinese government and government-linked companies use financial leverage and influence operations beyond its borders to silence critics of China’s authoritarian model and influence domestic political decision-making in China’s favor.

Whether through sharp power tactics or leveraging economic investments, the Chinese Communist Party seeks to build political influence in target countries through such efforts. These activities are often meant to influence local government decisions over time—contributing to societal divisions and political corruption, which in turn leads to state capture by China and an expansive illiberal sphere of influence hostile to the United States.

It is becoming clear that fragile democracies and authoritarian states are most susceptible to such influence. In countries including Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, weak governance structures are further undermined by the influence of large sums of Chinese government investment, feeding corruption and derailing the government from representing the interests of citizens.

While established and developed democracies may be able to more effectively address such foreign authoritarian influence, for many developing countries, this influence succeeds primarily because governments caught in Chinese debt traps have no choice but to work with the Chinese government and government-linked companies and organizations. In most cases, the West has not sought to actively compete with China nor provide alternatives for host governments.

It is well past time for the U.S. to confront this challenge. Helping countries build political resiliency to corruption and state capture by a hostile authoritarian power is an American national security interest. One important way of doing this is to invest in bolstering democratic institutions so that they can represent the interests of their people and resist this crypto-colonization. IRI is pushing back on this development with a new initiative designed to expose the projection of Chinese sharp power in Europe and South Asia. In doing so, we will increase awareness among our democratic partners of the perils of China's efforts to suborn their democracies and help them resist its dangers.

OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

Other lines of IRI work include helping countries pursue *anti-corruption* programs. This not only helps legitimize democracy in those countries; it creates a better environment for American business. American corporations struggle in countries marred by kleptocracy; they thrive where there is rule of law, open government and strong institutions that help create a level playing field for business and protect their investments.

IRI also works extensively on *youth empowerment* around the world through our youth initiative, Generation Democracy. Africa alone will have more than one billion new people born over the next 30 years. Young people will need a voice in their country's politics so they do not become marginalized and aggrieved in ways that produce vast, destabilizing flows of migration and new extremist networks.

Finally, IRI is committed to promoting *women's empowerment*, which we carry out through our Women's Democracy Network program. This is a vital component of democracy promotion, because we know that where women have a strong voice in society and politics, those countries are less likely to be corrupt, violent, and dangerous to their people and their neighbors.

CONCLUSION

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony today. There is no doubt that the U.S. faces an array of daunting challenges to our strategic interests and national security, and it can be tempting to take refuge in the mistaken belief that democracy promotion is a luxury we simply cannot afford. Yet as IRI Chairman Senator John McCain argues in his new memoir,

“[America] has done great good in the world because we believed our ideals are the natural aspiration of all mankind, and that the principles, rules, and alliances of the international order we superintended would improve the security and prosperity of all who joined it. That leadership has had its costs, but we have become incomparably powerful and wealthy as well.”

Democracy assistance isn't simply a matter of making ourselves feel good, or of doing the right thing; it is a way of advancing our interests and influence through what is arguably our most powerful export—our values. I am grateful for the opportunity to represent an organization that is helping to do that around the world, with the generous support of the Congress, and I am proud to stand alongside our friends at NED and NDI on that journey.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.