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Chairman Schiff Opening Statement on Global Rise of Authoritarianism

*Autocracy's Advance and Democracy's Decline: National Security Implications of
the Rise of Authoritarianism Around the World*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA), Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, delivered the following opening statement at the committee's open hearing on the rise of authoritarianism around the world, autocratic regimes and their practices, the decline in democratic governance and faith in liberal democracy, and the threat these trends pose to the United States.

Full statement below:

Chairman Schiff:

When the Berlin Wall fell in late 1989, followed two years later by the demise of the Soviet Union, it seemed that the Enlightenment ideals that animated the birth of our nation – democracy, equality and Jefferson's "unalienable rights" - had finally triumphed.

As the academic Frances Fukuyama put it then, we had reached "the end of history" and liberal democracy represented an end to ideology and presaged an era of political harmony.

As humanity's bloodiest century drew to a close – a century that had seen two cataclysmic world wars and titanic ideological struggles - between fascism and democracy, between Soviet communism and capitalism and between colonialism and self-determination - the optimism of the early 1990s was understandable.

For much of the decade following the Soviet collapse, it seemed that the triumphalists would be proven right and that the worldwide march of liberty and democracy would be permanent. Even Russia took cautious steps down the democratic path, and many in the U.S. and elsewhere held out hope that China would also marry its newly dynamic economy to governance more accountable to the Chinese people.

Today, it is clear that trust in the inevitability of democratic ascendance was, if not misplaced, certainly premature, and a new war of ideologies has emerged pitting liberal democracy against autocracy - not the old autocracy of monarchial Europe, but a rebranding that distorts and subverts the institutions that are the foundation of the West's success – strong legislatures, independent judiciaries, a free press, and dynamic civil societies.

Whether measured by numerical scorecard, as the democracy advocacy organization Freedom House has done annually in its “Freedom in the World” reports, or by observing recent political developments in countries such as Turkey, the Philippines, Hungary, Poland, Brazil, Egypt, and yes, Russia and China, democracy is on the retreat and authoritarianism is filling the void.

The 21st-Century autocrat asserts himself as a legitimate alternative to perceived shortcomings in democracy and representative government. In an era of rapid technological advancement, income inequality, the hollowing out of the middle class and unease with the pace of cultural changes, the modern despot promises easy answers and provides convenient scapegoats.

The trappings of democracy sometimes remain in place, often with elections that are neither free nor fair, or a pliant legislature that rubberstamps the authoritarian’s edicts. Ruling authority is increasingly centralized, and national interests become synonymous with the autocrat’s personal interests. Independent institutions or critics are targeted as obstacles to progress or enemies of the nation and marginalized, whether by purge, arrest, or delegitimization.

In some cases, these autocrats rise to the top of representative government through legitimate electoral processes or other political mechanics functioning as intended, only to chip away at democratic institutions and norms once in office.

Such centralization of power has bred a newfound assertiveness, which has manifested itself across the world stage. Russia successfully exploited the openness of our political dialogue, a defining element of American democracy, to exacerbate divisions along racial and societal lines during the 2016 election. Last year, the Director of National Intelligence and other government agencies announced before the 2018 midterms that Russia and other foreign actors were persisting in covert political influence activities, including through the dissemination of false information and propaganda.

Beijing has wielded economic might to bend the global political environment toward more favorable terms for itself, through its “Belt and Road Initiative” and the export of advanced telecommunications and network equipment. This projection of power comes with the not-too-subtle expectation that recipients pay careful heed to Beijing’s strategic interests. It also provides those countries with the technical means to control and monitor the Internet and other communication technologies domestically – and stifle online dissent or access to independent sources of information. Not to mention the capacity to monitor the movement of its citizens through CCTV that rivals anything that George Orwell might have imagined.

With today’s hearing, I hope we can complement previous hearings into China’s military expansion and its strategies for future technological superiority to understand how Beijing uses both as avenues for advancing its authoritarian agenda. And if China hopes to create network of dependent countries – or worse, so-called “authoritarian capitalist” imitators – that are in thrall to Beijing’s largesse or have built high-tech surveillance states of their own, that is a threatening trend that the U.S., through its Intelligence Community, needs to comprehensively understand.

Our Committee has a global purview, and rising authoritarianism is a global threat. Director of National Intelligence Coats, in his prepared testimony before our Senate counterparts last month, pointed to an alignment between Chinese and Russian interests not seen since the 1950s – interests that are inherently antagonistic toward the sanctity of human rights, democratic processes, and individual liberties.

As Americans, we are justly proud that modern democracy was born here, but we have become dangerously complacent in recent years. Our voter participation rates are woefully low. Civics education, once a staple for generations of American students, has withered away and too many of us are disengaged from the political process. Democracy and liberty may be our birthright, but no people is immune to the siren song of those who promise to solve our problems for us.

We must also preserve and reinforce America's place as the global champion of democracy and ensure that our values guide our interests – not the other way around. Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis's resignation letter warned about China and Russia's desire "to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model" and admonished the nation not to shirk its unique responsibility. "While the US remains the indispensable nation in the free world," he wrote, "we cannot protect our interests or serve that role effectively without maintaining strong alliances and showing respect to those allies."

Just over a week ago, I traveled to Europe to participate in the Munich Security Conference and to meet with NATO officials and European Union leaders in Brussels. Mr. Turner did as well. In both places, and in every meeting, our nation's closest friends and partners expressed their concern that we are retreating from the position that we have occupied for three quarters of a century as the leader of the global coalition of democracies and the head of a unique and durable transatlantic partnership. NATO was born seventy years ago to present a united front against Soviet expansionism. As we confront the new challenge of Twenty First Century authoritarianism, it remains just as relevant today.

With that, I recognize the Ranking Member for any opening statement he wishes to make.

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