



Center for a  
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**House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence**

**Hearing on “Autocracy’s Advance and Democracy’s Decline: National Security Implications of the Rise of Authoritarianism Around the World”**

Chairman Schiff, Ranking Member Nunes, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here.

I served for almost a decade in the United States intelligence community, both in the Central Intelligence Agency and the Directorate of National Intelligence. During this time, I helped shape the Agency’s efforts to understand the forces fueling authoritarianism, the way these regimes maintain their grip on power, and the factors driving democratic decline. During my time in the intelligence community and my previous work as an academic, I have come to view the rise of authoritarianism as one of the most significant threats to U.S. national security and to the American way of life.

By all accounts, this is the most trying time for democracy since the 1930s when fascism spread across much of Europe. Not only is repression rising in expected places like China and Russia, but for the first time since the end of the Cold War, long-established democracies are being seriously challenged. Today’s threats to democracy are real. But democracy’s decline is not inevitable. Democracies have proven remarkably resilient over time. They have faced challenges, and they have found ways to renew themselves to surmount them.

That is the task before us. To meet this challenge and forge an effective set of strategies, however, we must recognize that political dynamics are changing. There are changes in democracies, changes in autocracies, and changes in the international system that are increasingly conducive to the spread of autocracy. In my remarks, I will address these three fundamental changes that are reshaping the contest between democracy and authoritarianism.

*Bold.*

*Innovative.*

*Bipartisan.*

## 1. Changes in democracy: Democracies are breaking down in new ways.

Until recently, it was safe to assume that Western societies would be governed by moderate political parties and remain committed to liberal democratic values, open economies, and multilateral cooperation.<sup>1</sup> We could also assume that respect for the core principles of free and fair elections, rule of law, human rights, and civil liberties were secure in a large and growing number of countries. Yet it is clear that these assumptions are no longer valid. Instead, factors such as globalization, migration, rising inequality, and stagnating living standards for broad swaths of citizens in Western democracies are leading many to believe that democracy no longer works for them.

Rising citizen dissatisfaction is fueling polarization and political divides. Information technologies and social media amplify these fissures. While many authoritarian regimes are harnessing social media to tighten their control, these same technologies are fraying the social bonds of democratic societies from within. The digital technologies that promise to connect people and enable a free exchange of ideas are increasingly being used by populists and other extreme voices to amplify their messages. These dynamics have contributed to a decline in popular support for the political center and fragmented politics across Europe. Such fragmentation is contributing to gridlock that threatens to undermine people's support for democratic rule. The dysfunction that polarization and fragmentation breed also fuels Russian and Chinese narratives that democracy does not deliver.

These trends in Western democracies are creating fertile ground for the rise of illiberal populism. Once in power, many populist parties pursue policies that slowly erode democracy from within. Today's populist leaders have learned from earlier strongmen such as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, Russia's Vladimir Putin, and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who incrementally undermined democracy. Such leaders assume power through relatively free and fair elections and subsequently leverage societal dissatisfaction to gradually undercut institutional constraints on their rule, sideline opponents, and weaken civil society. Despite coming to power in different historical and cultural contexts, their approach is the same: they stack key political institutions with loyalists and allies (particularly in the judicial and security sectors) and muzzle the media through legislation and censorship. Their slow and piecemeal approach makes it difficult to pinpoint when democracy actually collapses.<sup>2</sup>

The erosion of democratic rules and norms at the hands of democratically-elected incumbents, what scholars refer to as “authoritarianization,”<sup>3</sup> is a major change in the ways that democratic governments have traditionally collapsed. Until recently, coups have been the biggest threat to

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<sup>1</sup> Pippa Norris (2017). “Is Western Democracy Backsliding? Diagnosing the Risks.” Journal of Democracy web exchange; [https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/media/Journal%20of%20Democracy%20Web%20Exchange%20-%20Norris\\_0.pdf](https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/media/Journal%20of%20Democracy%20Web%20Exchange%20-%20Norris_0.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Nancey Bermeo (2016). “On democratic backsliding.” Journal of Democracy. 27(1), pp.5-19 and Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, “How Democracies Fall Apart: Why Populism Is a Pathway to Autocracy.” Foreign Affairs, December 5, 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-12-05/how-democracies-fall-apart>.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz (2018). How Dictatorships Work. Cambridge University Press.

democracy.<sup>4</sup> From 1946 to 1999, 64 percent of democracies that collapsed did so via coups. In the last decade, however, authoritarianization has been on the rise. Authoritarianization now accounts for 40 percent of all democratic failures—a figure that is on par with the frequency of coups. If current trends persist, authoritarianization will soon become the most common way that democracies crumble and autocracies emerge.

## 2. Changes in autocracy: Highly personalized autocrats are on the rise.

Twenty-first-century autocrats are not the same as their Cold War predecessors. In the face of what looked like their inevitable extinction in the 1990s and early 2000s, dictators have changed their strategies. Today's authoritarian regimes have become more resilient and a more formidable challenge to democracy. Research shows that today's authoritarian regimes last longer than their predecessors. From 1946 to 1989, the typical autocracy lasted 14 years. This number has nearly doubled since the end of the Cold War to an average of 20 years. As authoritarian regimes become savvier and more durable, global democracy is likely to suffer.<sup>5</sup>

Autocracies are evolving in a number of important ways. They have learned to mimic elements of democracy, for example by regularly holding elections, allowing multiple political parties to exist, and providing space for legislatures to function. They seek to portray themselves as upholders of the rule of law, and then weaponize the system to weaken the opposition. And they have adapted to manage the threats initially posed by social media. Authoritarian regimes have co-opted these technologies to deepen their grip internally, curb basic human rights, spread illiberal practices beyond their borders, and undermine public trust in open societies. New advances in facial recognition and artificial intelligence will only intensify and accelerate these maleficent practices.

Not only have the tactics of today's autocrats evolved, but so too has their form. Since the end of the Cold War, highly personalized autocracies—those regimes where power is highly concentrated in the hands of a single individual—are on the rise. As my colleagues Erica Frantz, Joseph Wright and I have shown, personalist dictatorships—or those regimes where power is highly concentrated in the hands of a single individual—have increased notably since the end of the Cold War. In 1988, personalist regimes comprised 23 percent of all dictatorships. Today, 40 percent of all autocracies are ruled by strongmen.<sup>6</sup>

The growing prevalence of personalized autocracies is cause for concern because they tend to produce the worst outcomes of any type of political regime: they tend to produce the most risky and

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<sup>4</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, “How Democracies Fall Apart: Why Populism Is a Pathway to Autocracy.” *Foreign Affairs*, December 5, 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-12-05/how-democracies-fall-apart>.

<sup>5</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz (2015). “Mimicking Democracy to Prolong Autocracies” *The Washington Quarterly*, 37:4 pp. 71–84.

<sup>6</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Erica Frantz, and Joseph Wright (2017). “The Global Rise of Personalized Politics: It's Not Just Dictators Anymore,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 40:1, 7-19 and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Erica Frantz, and Joseph Wright (2016), “The New Dictators: Why Personalism Rules,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 26, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-09-26/new-dictators>.

aggressive foreign policies; the most likely to invest in nuclear weapons;<sup>7</sup> the most likely to fight wars against democracies;<sup>8</sup> and the most likely to initiate interstate conflicts.<sup>9</sup> As the adventurism of Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Uganda's Idi Amin, and North Korea's Kim Jong-un suggests, a lack of accountability often translates into an ability to take risks that other dictatorial systems simply cannot afford.

Russia underscores the link between rising personalism and aggression. Although Putin's actions in Crimea and Syria were designed to advance a number of key Russian goals, it is also likely that Putin's lack of domestic constraints increased the level of risk he was willing to accept in pursuit of those goals. Putin's tight control over the media ensures that the public receives only the official narrative of foreign events. Limited access to outside information makes it difficult for Russians to access unbiased accounts of the goings-on in the rest of the world and gauge Putin's success in the foreign policy arena. Putin's elimination of competing voices within his regime further ensures that he faces minimal accountability for his foreign policy actions.

Politics in China show many of these same trends. Xi's increasingly aggressive posture in the South China Sea has occurred alongside the rising personalization of the political system. Xi has amassed substantial personal power since coming to office in 2012 and continues to roll back the norms of the post-Mao collective leadership system. If Xi further consolidates control and limits accountability—particularly over military and foreign policy bodies—research suggests that he, too, could feel free to further escalate his aggressive rhetoric and actions in the South China Sea.

Not only do personalist dictatorships pursue aggressive foreign policies—they are also often difficult and unpredictable partners. Research underscores that, thanks to limited constraints on decision-making, personalist leaders generally have the latitude to change their minds on a whim, producing volatile and erratic policies.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, personalist leaders—think Putin, Bolivian President Evo Morales, and Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro—are among those autocrats who are most suspicious of U.S. intentions and who see the creation of an external enemy as an effective means of boosting public support. Anti-U.S. rhetoric, therefore, is most pronounced in personalist settings.

Finally, personalist regimes are the most corrupt and the least likely to democratize. Strongman autocracies, more so than any other type of government, depend on the distribution of financial incentives to maintain power.<sup>11</sup> As such, these leaders are the most likely to squander foreign aid and sideline competent individuals, hollowing out those institutions that could plausibly constrain their power. Their departure from power often entails instability and violence. And they leave conditions that are highly inhospitable for a transition to democracy. Put differently, when leaders like Turkish

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Way and Jessica L. P. Weeks, "Making It Personal: Regime Type and Nuclear Proliferation," 58(3): pp. 705-719.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Peceny, Caroline Beer, and Shannon Sanchez-Terry (2002), "Dictatorial Peace?" *American Political Science Review* 96(1): pp. 15-26.

<sup>9</sup> Jessica Weeks (2012), "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict," *American Political Science Review* 106(2): pp. 326-347.

<sup>10</sup> Erica Frantz and Natasha Ezrow (2011). *The Politics of Dictatorship: Institutions and Outcomes in Authoritarian Regimes*. Lynne Rienner.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Wright (2010). "Aid Effectiveness and the Politics of Personalism" *Comparative Political Studies* 43(6): pp. 735-762.

President Erdoğan roll back democracy and consolidate personal power, the effects of their actions persist long after they exit office.

### **3. Changes in the international system: China's rise and Russian assertiveness threaten democracy.**

In addition to changes taking place within democracies and authoritarian regimes, there are tectonic shifts in the international environment that are creating conditions more conducive to the spread of autocracy. As Western democracies are increasingly distracted with their own domestic challenges, authoritarian regimes—especially Russia and China—have grown more assertive on the global stage. Russia and China are convinced of the threat of Western-backed revolutions and have responded by adapting their survival tactics and exporting their best practices for guarding against the “threat” of engagement with the democratic West. Russian and Chinese efforts to counter democracy promotion are not new. But they have changed in scope and intensity. Since 2014, Russia in particular has gone on the offensive with its efforts to undermine Western democracies. Because Moscow and Beijing gauge their power in relation to the United States, they view weakening Western democracy as a means of enhancing their own standing.<sup>12</sup>

Shifts in geopolitical power are increasing the potency of Russian and Chinese actions. China's rise and Russia's assertiveness provide other leaders with examples of viable alternatives to the West and alter perceptions about what constitutes a legitimate regime. In recent years, China in particular has sought to portray itself as a compelling alternative to democracy. According to the World Bank, China's GDP growth has averaged nearly 10 percent a year since 1978—the fastest sustained expansion by a major economy in history—and has lifted more than 800 million people out of poverty.<sup>13</sup> Many now view China as demonstrating that the road to prosperity no longer needs to run through liberal democracy. Even without a deliberate strategy to export his model of governance, Putin has offered a model that others seek to emulate. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for example, seem to admire Putin's strongman tactics and have adopted elements of his repertoire to enhance their own control. This means that prominent authoritarian powers can create conditions that are more conducive to autocracy even when they do not proactively seek to promote a coherent alternative ideology. In other words, autocracies do not have to engage in “autocracy promotion” to weaken democracy.

Beyond demonstration effects, a shift in the balance of economic and military power away from the democratic West is increasing the potency of the threat that countries such as Russia and China pose to democracy.<sup>14</sup> Research shows that the structure of the international system—whether democratic or authoritarian powers are most dominant—directly explains how many democracies or autocracies

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<sup>12</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, “How Russia and China Undermine Democracy: Can the West Counter the Threat?” *Foreign Affairs*, October 2, 2018.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-10-02/how-russia-and-china-undermine-democracy>

<sup>13</sup> World Bank, “The World Bank In China,” Text/HTML, World Bank, September 26, 2018,

<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>.

<sup>14</sup> Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefan Foa, “The End of the Democratic Century,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2018 Issue.

are present globally.<sup>15</sup> When a single democratic country dominates the international system—as the United States did in the aftermath of the Cold War—the number of democracies in the world peaks. When autocracies gain in influence, as the Soviet Union was during the Cold War, the pendulum swings in the other direction and the number of autocracies rises. This research suggests that China’s rising power and Russia’s assertiveness are creating conditions more conducive to the spread of autocracy.

Not only will the rising power and assertiveness of these countries pose a grave challenge to democracy, but there is compelling evidence suggesting that relations between Russia and China are growing closer.<sup>16</sup> China is now the largest importer of Russian oil, and China has surpassed Germany as Russia’s most important trading partner. Beyond economics, evidence across a host of political, military, and diplomatic indicators demonstrate deepening ties. The Directorate of National Intelligence’s 2019 Annual Threat Assessment to Congress included a section on Russia-China relations for the first time and warned of the potential that Russia and China “will collaborate to counter U.S. objectives, taking advantage of the rising doubts in some places about the liberal democratic model.”<sup>17</sup> The potential for Russia-China collusion and collaboration significantly increases the challenges to U.S. efforts to uphold democracy.

## **Recommendations for preventing authoritarian resurgence**

While it is true that democracy is still the most prevalent form of government in the world, current trends suggest that we may soon witness a disconcerting reversal. If democracies do not respond to the contemporary challenges described above, autocracies may soon become the international norm. The world’s democracies must be proactive and cannot afford complacency.

Efforts to prevent a widespread authoritarian resurgence must be broad, preemptive, and multifaceted. The following recommendations are not exhaustive but outline several strategic approaches that address the challenges stemming from changes inside democracies, inside autocracies, and in the broader international environment.

### **1. Act early.**

The slow and gradual way that democracies today are backsliding makes “authoritarianization” difficult to counter. Because it is subtle and incremental, there is no single moment that triggers widespread resistance or creates a focal point around which an opposition can coalesce. Although difficult to navigate, early intervention is key because it raises the prospects that backsliding can be halted. Unlike leaders that seize power through coups, autocrats that gain control by altering democratic processes seek to portray themselves as “democrats.” This makes them more sensitive to

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<sup>15</sup> Carles Boix (2011). “Democracy, development, and the international system.” *American Political Science Review*, 105(4), pp.809-828 and Seva Gunitsky (2014), “From Shocks to Waves: Hegemonic Transitions and Democratization in the Twentieth Century,” *International Organization* 68(3): pp. 561-597.

<sup>16</sup> See Graham Allison (2018), “China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making” *The National Interest* December 14, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-and-russia-strategic-alliance-making-38727>.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel R. Coats, “Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community,” § Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2019), <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>, p. 24.

international and domestic criticism that highlights the inconsistency between their behaviors and democratic norms. Moreover, in these settings, civil society or opposition actors have probably not yet been fully disbanded. International attention may embolden such actors to take advantage of the remaining political space to mobilize and impede the entrenchment of autocracy.

Early intervention is particularly important because the slow dismantling of democracy tends to give rise to highly personalized autocracies—the single most problematic regime type, as discussed above. Data show that from 2000 to 2010, when democracies failed as a result of authoritarianization, a highly personalized autocracy emerged in 75 percent of cases. Most often, these populist strongmen rise to power with the support of a legitimate political party but are then able to sideline competing voices. Russian President Putin, Venezuelan President Chávez, and Turkish President Erdoğan, for example, all came to power in this way.

The U.S. Congress should work to institutionalize its response to the slow dismantling of democracy by identifying the early warning signs and specifying actions that raise the cost for leaders orchestrating the incremental erosion of executive constraints. Although the initial signs of authoritarianization can be ambiguous, comparative political science research has progressed in identifying the signposts and indicators of this process. Working with the intelligence community and subject matter experts, the U.S. government should develop an early warning framework. Such a framework would equip Congress to proactively engage with at-risk countries, condemn early undemocratic maneuvers, and clearly articulate the actions they are willing to take in response to subsequent undemocratic moves.

## **2. Increase financial support to strengthen executive constraints and corruption, and sustain engagement with strategically important democracies.**

Congress should maintain strong support for external democracy assistance. Although there is no definitive blueprint for how such funds should be directed, research suggests that actions that strengthen executive constraints are particularly important for safeguarding democracy. The creation and maintenance of alternative centers of power that constrain governing officials—including strong political parties and representative assemblies, judiciaries, civil society, and the media—is particularly important to assure the durability of democracy and prevent the personalization of politics.

Focusing external assistance programs on combatting corruption will also be key. More so than other regime types, highly personalized autocracies rely on the distribution of corruption to sustain their hold on power. Disrupting corrupt networks therefore can deprive repressive regimes of the resources they use to maintain control. Corruption is also a tool that countries such as Russia and China use to gain international influence and their efforts to spread it weakens some actors' commitment to democracy. Congress should increase support for anti-corruption programs and ensure that U.S. government agencies, including the intelligence community, are equipped to combat corruption, including through the intelligence community's relationships with foreign intelligence services.

Not only should U.S. external support be used to strengthen executive constraints, but policymakers and congressionally-funded aid agencies must sustain their engagement with strategically important democracies. Political science research shows that a democracy's risk of breakdown declines

sometime between 17 and 20 years after the onset of democracy. However, the research shows that a declining risk of coups is the primary factor driving down a country's risk of democratic failure beyond this time frame. The threat of "authoritarianization," it turns out, does not diminish over time. Congress should therefore identify strategically important democracies—whose size or linkages with neighboring states would be most likely to affect an entire region—and sustain engagement, attention, and support for these countries.

### **3. Maintain America's competitive edge.**

Politics follows geopolitics; the maintenance of America's power and influence will be critical for the maintenance of democracy across the globe, as discussed above. Sustaining America's competitive edge will require U.S. policymakers to be committed to and focused on two interrelated sets of strategies.

First, the United States must seek to enhance the strength and resilience of democracy at home. When America's house is in order, it sets a powerful example that other actors can emulate and aspire to. These efforts must be far-reaching, ranging from policies addressing the education system to the workforce, the information environment to critical infrastructure, and inequality to campaign finance reform.

Legislation to manage the challenges stemming from technological change are likely to be particularly important. Artificial intelligence and automation will create new opportunities, but they will also exacerbate divisions between winners and losers by disrupting job markets and displacing workers. If governments are unable to identify new services, sectors, and occupations to replace the jobs that automation and other technologies will eliminate—and to train workers to fill them—the forces that have fueled populism will continue to rise.

Second, the United States Congress can help equip the United States to compete with China and other autocracies abroad. First and foremost, this will require that America embrace and strengthen its commitment to allies. The United States should be working with, not alienating, allies and partners in Europe and the Indo-Pacific region to address Russian aggression and China's rise. In a strategic competition with China, allies are among America's greatest assets. They are a force multiplier for U.S. influence, and they help the United States to uphold and support democracy across the globe. Only through close coordination and collaboration will the U.S. be able to effectively address China's coercive, unfair, and illegal trade and investment practices.

Finally, the U.S. Congress must be mindful of U.S. policies and approaches that may inadvertently push Russia and China closer together. An overreliance on sanctions, for example, could increase these actors' sense of common cause, including by providing them with greater incentive to develop mechanisms that would allow them to develop alternatives to the financial and trading channels that give U.S. sanctions enormous global weight.

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We are living in a time of rapid change. We find ourselves facing challenges whose sources and scope we do not yet fully understand, and for which the answers are not yet clear. History suggests



that it will be the democracies—and not the far more rigid authoritarian structures—that will have the resiliency required to harness change into advancement. But to meet the challenges before us, democracies will need to develop new ideas, new paradigms, new approaches—and the leadership to execute them—to maintain their competitive edge.

## Biography

### **Andrea Kendall-Taylor**

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Andrea Kendall-Taylor is a Senior Fellow and Director of the Transatlantic Security Program at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). She works on national security challenges facing the United States and Europe, focusing on Russia, populism and threats to democracy, and the state of the Transatlantic alliance.

Prior to joining CNAS, Andrea served for eight years as a senior intelligence officer. From 2015 to 2018, she was Deputy National Intelligence Officer for Russia and Eurasia at the National Intelligence Council (NIC) in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI). In this role Andrea led the U.S. intelligence community's strategic analysis on Russia, represented the IC in interagency policy meetings, provided analysis to the National Security Council, and briefed the DNI and other senior staff for White House and international meetings. Prior to joining the NIC, Andrea was a senior analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) where she worked on Russia and Eurasia, the political dynamics of autocracies, and democratic decline.

Andrea is an adjunct professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. Her work has been published in numerous political science and policy journals, including the *Journal of Peace Research*, *Democratization*, *Journal of Democracy*, *Foreign Affairs*, the *Washington Post*, the *Washington Quarterly*, and *Foreign Policy*.

Andrea received her B.A. in politics from Princeton University and her Ph.D. in political science from the University of California, Los Angeles. She was a Fulbright scholar in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, where she conducted dissertation research on oil and autocracy.