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THE IC'S OPPORTUNITY TO BOLSTER GLOBAL DEMOCRACY: STRENGTHENING INTEGRATION AND SUPPORTING WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT STRATEGY

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Threats to Global Democracy

Speaking at the March 2023 Summit for Democracy, Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Avril Haines called attention to the Intelligence Community's (IC's) increasing focus on the challenge of global authoritarianism. In her annual threat assessment, she noted that the IC for the first time included a section analyzing "trends in digital authoritarianism and malign influence" across the globe.[1] Importantly, DNI Haines also underscored the transnational nature of this threat, discussing the dozens of regimes that have reached across borders to suppress democratic rights.[2]

In the face of these challenges, the DNI's speech highlights a significant opportunity for the IC to strengthen its posture as it relates to confronting transnational threats to democracy. To improve its capacity to support whole-of-government strategy implementation on this topic, the IC should consider establishing integrative mechanisms dedicated to countering authoritarianism. To do so, the IC possesses a range of options, including the opportunity to replicate existing models for interagency integration within both ODNI and individual IC components.

While these courses of action do not provide a comprehensive path forward for U.S. government action on democracy—domestic challenges fall outside the scope of this paper[3]—they nonetheless offer concrete options to help the IC integrate its efforts, realign its priorities, and advance strategic-level national security interests.

The Current Challenge

The global growth of anti-democratic movements presents an urgent challenge to U.S. security and national interests.[4] For two decades, notes Freedom House, "democracy's opponents have labored persistently to dismantle this international order and the restraints it imposed on their [authoritarian] ambitions."[5]

And while authoritarian movements are often primarily driven by internal factors,[6] transnational actors have no doubt exacerbated democratic backsliding. Indeed, anti-democratic actors are increasingly coordinating across borders to express solidarity, share best practices, and enhance their effectiveness.[7] European actors, for example, have forged ties with India's Hindu nationalist movement, particularly surrounding the anti-democratic crackdowns in the Kashmir region that have severely curtailed Muslim citizens' rights.[8] This type of collaboration can facilitate the adoption of increasingly extreme positions and help "build a repertoire of practices [for international allies] to draw from," increasing their likelihood of success.[9] Researchers have likewise observed an uptick in transnational repression, occurring most often via the "co-optation of or cooperation with authorities in the host country."[10] All the while, transnational financial flows help to bolster anti-democratic movements, shielding authoritarian actors from criticism and legal accountability for corrupt practices.[11]

Compounding these challenges, this resurgence of authoritarian political activity coincides—and in some cases overlaps—with a rising threat of violence perpetrated by anti-democratic actors and movements.[12]

- In Germany, a recently disrupted plot to overthrow the government implicated a former parliamentarian and two other members of the Alternative für Deutschland party.[13] These arrests followed an attempted storming of the German parliament building just two years earlier.[14]
- More recently, Brazil also faced the threat of a violent, anti-democratic mob seeking to challenge the results of an election that unseated former President Jair Bolsonaro. In the wake of this incident, experts have questioned the willingness of security services to address these threats.[15]
- In India, vigilante violence against Muslims and other minority communities often occurs in the context of tacit acceptance—and even the active instigation—from state officials and others associated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.[16]

To confront this transnational challenge, the U.S. government has highlighted the protection of global democracy as a priority objective in recent strategy documents. Further action from the IC can help implement these plans.

U.S. Government Strategy on Global Democracy

The current National Security Strategy (NSS), released in October 2022, situates "a resurgence of authoritarianism" as a key threat to livelihoods and stability across the globe.[17] The NSS makes clear that the threat emerges both "from powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy,"[18] as well as smaller states that nonetheless play a crucial role in the geopolitical order.[19] To address this challenge, the NSS suggests that the U.S. government "will continually update [its] range of tools to advance democracy and counter authoritarianism."[20]

As policy documents increasingly emphasize democracy issues as central to U.S. national security, the demand for IC support to this strategic interest has likewise increased. Complementing the NSS, the White House also released a Strategy on Countering Corruption, which again focuses squarely on threats to global democracy. Kleptocrats and corrupt actors, it notes, "harness the international financial system to stash illicit wealth abroad and abuse democratic institutions to advance anti-democratic aims."[21] To mitigate these trends, the document explicitly highlights the role of the IC through a call to increase "intelligence prioritization, collection and analysis on corruption, corrupt actors, and their networks," and bolster "information sharing between the Intelligence Community and law enforcement."[22] Strategies at the department level have also emerged, including the U.S. Agency for International Development's publicly outlined plan to address autocracy.[23]

Collectively, these efforts help advance the broader Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal, first announced in December 2021.[24] Outside of government, a 2021 bipartisan task force on supporting democracy and countering authoritarianism emphasized the role of the IC in providing baseline analysis, sharing financial intelligence, and developing impact assessments for relevant programs.[25]

Although the most recent National Intelligence Strategy (NIS) does not focus on issues of global democracy and authoritarianism, the IC has taken notable steps in recent years to adapt in response to emerging threats. Perhaps most consequentially, ODNI has moved to confront "hostile foreign actors seeking to influence the U.S. Government, state and local governments, or public opinion and behaviors through overt or covert means" via the recent creation of the Foreign Malign Influence Center.[26]

IN THE WAKE OF DEMOCRATIC DECLINE ACROSS THE GLOBE, THE IC SHOULD DEFINE THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM, ESTABLISH A SET OF PRIORITIES, AND INSTITUTIONALIZE ITS SUPPORT TO WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

These recent developments offer a strong foundation for more a comprehensive intelligence approach to the threat of authoritarianism—an approach that will require attention to a broader range of anti-democratic trends perpetrated by both state and non-state actors. In short, the IC should look beyond just influence campaigns and toward other topics, such as autocrats' administrative maneuvers to consolidate power, the social cleavages that breed instability, and the threat of violence by anti-democratic actors.[27] How might the IC pursue this objective?

Available Policy Options to Improve Intelligence Integration

The IC, in tandem with other U.S. government partners, has a key role to play in supporting democracy and confronting global authoritarianism.[28] As highlighted above, policymakers will look to the IC to bolster its collection, analysis, and information sharing related to transnational actors who threaten democracy. Because this issue transcends clear regional and functional boundaries,[29] such a task cannot be the sole responsibility of just one IC component. Instead, the IC should strive to enhance its integration posture on this topic. Such an approach would enable the IC to engage its "diverse set of tools" and to harness "specialized knowledge and skillsets from each [IC] component."[30] Moreover, the focus on collaborating across components could help the IC address "non-obvious issues that implicate multiple department and agency equities."[31] In a time of shifting budgets and priorities, strengthening integrative mechanisms would also "embed [current national-level priorities] in decision-making structures" in a way that supports the implementation of long-term goals.[32]

ODNI possesses a wide range of options to pursue this objective, particularly given the role of the Mission Integration directorate (ODNI/MI), which "integrates mission capabilities, informs enterprise resource and policy decisions and ensures the timely delivery of intelligence."[33] That said, the onus lies not just on ODNI, but the interagency more broadly. Regardless of the route chosen, the IC should ensure that policymakers and other customers have a clear channel to engage the Community on this topic and leverage its expertise as appropriate.

Accordingly, IC leadership should consider:

Elevating Global Democracy issues to the NIMC and National Intelligence Council by creating both a National Intelligence Manager (NIM) and a National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for Global Democracy.

- Housed within ODNI/MI, the National Intelligence Management Council (NIMC) comprises "the ODNI's principal substantive advisors within and across specific regions and functional issues."[34,35] By driving resource discussions and guiding intelligence collection across the IC, a NIM for Global Democracy could help shape a posture that strengthens the IC's understanding of the transnational nature of this issue.[36]

- The National Intelligence Council (NIC), meanwhile, "consists of the most senior and expert intelligence analysts supporting the Director of National Intelligence."[37] Within this construct, NIOs help draft National Intelligence Estimates, IC-coordinated assessments, and Sense of the Community Memoranda.[38] The creation of a NIO for Global Democracy would therefore improve the IC's capacity to produce strategic-level analysis that informs the work of senior policymakers.[39]

Creating an IC Executive Coordinator for Global Democracy

- Short of elevation to the NIMC, ODNI might consider borrowing the model of the Election Threats Executive (ETE) to create an IC Executive Coordinator for Global Democracy. This coordinator could help synchronize efforts across IC components and serve as an "entry point to the IC" for its customers.[40]

- Though this Executive may not match a NIM's seniority, the creation of the role could nonetheless serve as a pilot for IC integration on this topic and set the stage for further growth in the future. Indeed, the Foreign Malign Influence Center has grown out of the ETE, demonstrating the potential for expansion.[41]

Establishing a Global Democracy Intelligence Committee within the NIC

- Rather than designating a single official to serve as the principal adviser for global democracy, ODNI might instead create a Technical Production Committee within the NIC, building on the longstanding model of committees for Joint Atomic Energy, Weapon and Space Systems, and Scientific and Technical Intelligence.[42] Under

the guidance of the NIC Chair, these Intelligence Committees help coordinate IC assessments, facilitate information sharing, and promote the efficient use of IC resources.[43]

Standing Up a Democracy Information Unit with the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR)

- Given the key role of the State Department in bolstering democratic institutions across the globe, INR may be a particularly appropriate IC component to lead such an effort. Such an institution could directly support State's Coordinator for Global Democratic Renewal, and co-location within the Department could facilitate collaboration between the IC and policy community.[44]

- The INR-based Humanitarian Information Unit (HIU) could offer a useful model for an agency-driven integration mechanism for intelligence related to democracy and authoritarianism.
  - HIU, which consists of both IC and non-IC personnel, serves as an "interagency center to identify, collect, analyze, and disseminate all-source information critical to U.S. government decision-makers and partners in preparation for and response to humanitarian emergencies worldwide."[45]

Envisioning Support for Foundational Mission Objectives

To meet the ambitious objectives set out in national-level strategy documents, the IC will likely need to strengthen its posture for each of its three foundational mission objectives: strategic intelligence, anticipatory intelligence, and current operations intelligence.[46] Consequently, the following sections outline how the creation of a new institution dedicated to integration could enhance the IC's approach to each of these objectives.

Strategic Intelligence: *the context, knowledge, and understanding of the strategic environment required to support U.S. national security policy and planning decisions.*

- The elevation of this issue to the NIMC or another IC component would facilitate strategic-level policy de-confliction efforts—a key component of effective IC mission management.[47]
  - For example, the presence of a democracy-focused adviser could help guide planning for security assistance packages through the lens of how such policies could embolden autocrats or otherwise undermine democracy.[48]

- A clearer understanding of the strategic environment related to global democracy could inform a more efficient allocation of resources related to this topic—including through a "triage approach" to democracy support or a focus on democratic "bright spots."[49] A NIM or Executive Coordinator, in particular, would also serve as valuable advocate in budget debates, helping to drive resources towards priority areas.

- Scholars have warned that "important steps for conserving liberalism, even defensive ones, will generate pushback against the liberal order," noting that "in advancing liberal rights, policymakers have to navigate significant tradeoffs, inconsistencies, and contention."[50] Improved analytic efforts may help mitigate this concern by improving strategic insight into how foreign actors may react to U.S. efforts to counter democratic backsliding.

Anticipatory Intelligence: *information to identify emerging trends, changing conditions, and undervalued developments.*

- The "cross-disciplinary approach" typically associated with anticipatory intelligence underscores the value of an IC mechanism charged with coordinating efforts across a range of intelligence domains.[51] Anticipatory intelligence "explores the potential for cascading events or activities to reinforce, amplify, or accelerate conflict,"[52] and stands out as particularly important to help the IC foresee authoritarian power grabs, emerging alliances among autocrats, and violent mobilization by anti-democratic actors.

○ The U.S. government could replicate anticipatory intelligence successes observed in the lead-up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine by preemptively exposing planned anti-democratic activity to deter such behavior and shore up international cooperation.[53]

Current Operations Intelligence: *the collection, analysis, operations, and planning support that IC elements conduct to support the needs of military, diplomatic, homeland security, and policy customers.*

- To implement key national-level strategies, the U.S. government will increasingly look to the IC to provide timely support to enable its activity related to confronting authoritarianism and supporting global democracy. As highlighted in the Strategy on Countering Corruption, a democracy-focused institution in the IC could help guide policy prioritization for addressing the key actors who facilitate the financial, ideological, material, and logistical support for anti-democratic repression, corruption, and violence.[54]
  - ○ Timely intelligence support could enable targeted sanctions on transnational repressors and other enablers,[55] and also help development officials understand whether specific assistance programs "may be manipulated to serve autocratic interests."[56]
- More broadly, democracy-focused intelligence efforts could help provide the nuance necessary to avoid a "one-size-fits all" approach to diplomatic engagement with countries experiencing democratic backsliding.[57]

With these benefits in mind, it is also worth pre-emptively addressing concerns about this paper's recommendations to clarify how they could facilitate an efficient and responsible use of IC resources in support of U.S. government priorities.

Opportunities to Share Burden and Shape Policy

Avoiding NIM-CT Mission Creep and Overburden

Because this paper has frequently discussed trends in foreign anti-democratic violence, it is worth directly addressing why this distinct form of violence should fall within the purview of a newly established IC institution. Some observers may be tempted to expand the remit of the National Intelligence Manager for Counterterrorism (NIM-CT) and the counterterrorism community more broadly to address the totality of this challenge.[58]

To be certain, the IC's recent work on the transnational aspects of racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism (REMVE) marks a positive step toward addressing the totality of terrorist movements that threaten U.S. interests.[59] The counterterrorism community should absolutely continue to address terrorist threats beyond just the jihadist violence that has dominated the U.S. government's attention for the past two decades. Though largely decentralized, REMVEs clearly constitute a terrorist threat, and their propensity for premeditated, mass casualty attacks aligns well with the definition of terrorism as articulated in title 22 of the U.S. Code and adopted by key U.S. government agencies.[60] Similarly, where anti-government violent extremism presents a clear terrorist threat, the counterterrorism community should similarly take on this issue without hesitation.[61]

That said, the IC should consider that:

- Not all foreign anti-democratic violence fits the definition of terrorism.[62]

- Other forms of foreign anti-democratic violence can nonetheless exacerbate democratic decline, embolden autocrats, and threaten U.S. national security.[63]

Perhaps most consequentially, the definition of international terrorism apparently adopted by the State Department and National Counterterrorism Center (whose leadership is dual-hatted as NIM-CT) implies a terrorist act must be politically motivated *and* pre-meditated.[64] A considerable portion of anti-democratic

violence, however, occurs spontaneously and therefore arguably outside the purview of the U.S. government counterterrorism enterprise.[65]

Thus, while CT officials focus their efforts on terrorism as defined by the U.S. Code, a democracy-focused IC body could address a wider range of violent activity across the globe, including its connection to broader authoritarian movements. This new role, for example, could explore the relationship between violence abroad in the form hate crimes or pogroms and the policy platforms of illiberal political parties.[66] Similarly, the IC could help calibrate the U.S. government's response to the full spectrum of attacks on press freedom, ranging from legal repression to targeted violence.[67] And whereas the counterterrorism enterprise may be hamstrung in assessing certain forms of foreign anti-democratic electoral violence and harassment, the broader IC could help fill this gap.[68]

Beyond these definitional concerns, there are practical reasons for exercising caution about expanding the scope of violence covered by the U.S. government counterterrorism enterprise.[69] For one, the intrusive intelligence collection methods associated with the counterterrorism enterprise could generate backlash and cause significant damage to relationships with partners experiencing various stages of democratic decline.[70] Equally important, it is worth emphasizing that the center of gravity of U.S. national security policy has clearly shifted away from counterterrorism.[71] An attempt to direct additional resources toward a waning mission function would almost certainly meet resistance.

The incorporation of non-terrorist anti-democratic violence within the purview of a new IC institution, on the other hand, would enable the Community to take advantage of existing regional expertise and simultaneously examine the nexus of this violence to broader political movements. The combination of regional perspectives, diplomatic reporting, and open-source intelligence may offer a strong base for strategic intelligence and early warning against spikes in foreign anti-democratic violence.[72]

The IC needs a mechanism to approach the forms of anti-democratic violence that do not fit neatly into its counterterrorism framework. Rather than expanding the authorities and the budget of the NIM-CT, IC should seek to address this threat within the context of the transnational spread of anti-democratic movements more broadly. A new IC mechanism should strive to outline these concepts in more detail in a Unifying Intelligence Strategy (UIS) or similar strategic guidance, including opportunities to coordinate with NIM-CT when appropriate.

Addressing Risks

Despite the benefits outlined above, it is worth recognizing that these courses of action may prompt concern among those worried about both strategic overreach and IC authorities. Memory of previous U.S. government efforts to advance democracy—particularly through so-called nation-building projects[73]—may deter support for any of the above measures. These options, however, would not expand the power of the IC or suggest an increase in operational activity related to this topic. To the contrary, these courses of action may help re-focus IC efforts on strategic-level analysis and reverse the dominance of "intelligence for action."[74]

In addition to these concerns, critics of the great power competition (GPC) paradigm might also worry that the elevation of global democracy as a functional focus could imply or endorse the view that China serves as the singular "harbinger of rising authoritarianism worldwide."[75] Instead, a more robust intelligence approach to the broader issue of global democracy may help elucidate the perspective that "the more proximate roots of democratic backsliding in most countries are domestic."[76]

Moreover, an IC integrative mechanism could inform a harm mitigation approach to help prevent the U.S. government from exacerbating democratic decay abroad. As previously noted, this mechanism could

provide strategic insight into how certain forms of security assistance and intelligence cooperation could bolster autocrats or enable transnational repression.[77] That is, an intelligence adviser charged with focusing on the protection of global democracy could help guard against the implementation of reflexive—and potentially counterproductive—policies in the name of GPC.[78]

To fully address these concerns and guard against overreach, a new official should codify such perspectives in a resulting UIS or internal strategy guidance.

The IC's Imperative

In the wake of democratic decline across the globe, the U.S. government has chosen to highlight the issue of democracy in the NSS, as well as the functional strategies that guide the interagency on key functional issues. Now, the IC should define the scope of the problem, establish a set of priorities, and institutionalize its support to these whole-of-government initiatives. At the very least, the next NIS should aim to align itself with the NSS and highlight the role of intelligence in addressing the challenge of global democratic decline. Institutionalizing integration efforts would go one step further to elevate this issue and strengthen the IC's posture.

This issue demands specialized attention specifically because of its multifaceted nature. Rachel Kleinfeld, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, notes that "Democracy support must have different theories of change crafted to meet the challenges of autocratization in consolidated democracies, backsliding in newer but once-solid democracies, coups in some of the least consolidated democracies, and the unique difficulties presented by China and Russia."[79] Without an empowered intelligence authority to help tailor its approach to this complex challenge, the IC may struggle to unify its efforts and implement established national security objectives.

Endnotes

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