

Achieving Peace through Universal Democracy

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Introduction

All the way back in 1795, Kant proposed a path that would lead to an end to all military conflict, what he called perpetual peace, in part by reforming the internal political structure of a country so that decisions about war and peace ultimately made by the government would require the consent of the voters. If every country simply adopted this internal political structure, along with a few other recommendations, then war could be avoided and different states could live peacefully together (Kant 1795). This prescient philosophical essay provided the foundation for future attempts to achieve world peace through universal democracy, and this long path towards peace has now reached a point where the efficacy of this strategy has become apparent and stands a legitimate chance of ultimately becoming successful.

The first empirical observation in favor of this distinct vision is that more and more countries around the world have adopted a democratic political system, which, when combined with the second empirical observation that democratic countries generally do not fight wars against one another, means there are fewer opportunities for countries to go to war. This path has not yet achieved an end to all military conflict, in part because undemocratic countries still go to war with one another, but also because democratic countries still go to war with undemocratic ones. The way then to get even closer to this distinct utopian vision is to make even more countries democratic, and this policy memo analyzes how to get the remaining undemocratic countries to become more democratic over time.

Three Types of Undemocratic Countries

When trying to push ahead on the goal of achieving world peace through universal democratization, there are three remaining categories of undemocratic countries that probably require similar strategies for reform. The first category of undemocratic countries are the former communist countries like Russia, China, North Korea, and Vietnam. These countries have all gone through the common experience of having lived under authoritarian political systems while communism was at its peak, and all have been resisting attempts toward political liberalization, even as many countries in Eastern Europe have made progress in making democratic political reforms. The fact that all of these countries at one point had strict command and control economies also represents a common similarity that changes how you approach the problem of democratization.

The second category of undemocratic countries are the authoritarian Muslim majority countries that often reside in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Syria, Yemen, Jordan, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman among others are all generally undemocratic countries who also have

large majorities of the population following Islam. This common cultural and religious heritage presents a similar political problem when it comes to democratization, where even if some countries have vast oil wealth and others do not, many of them share a common language and religious orientation that has important implications for their political development.

The third category of undemocratic countries are the poor developing countries in Africa and Asia that do not have robust economies or lack widespread access to education for their citizens. In order to turn these countries into stable democracies, a strategy for broad based economic growth is likely to be necessary to achieve successful political liberalization as well as a set of policies to improve the system of education in those countries as well. Culturally these countries are much more diverse than the other categories of undemocratic countries, but the key limiting factor in each of these countries is the lack of economic development, so a common approach to democratization will be useful in many of these impacted countries.

Five Parts to Any Strategy of Democratic Reform

Now that the three major categories of undemocratic countries have been identified, each unique democratization problem is going to need its own underlying strategy, and each new strategy is going to have five parts that remain in common.

The first part to any new strategy of democratization is to identify the countries that represent key test cases for each category of undemocratic countries, so that democratic countries can prioritize their efforts in order to have maximum impact. For example, the former communist countries are going to be looking to see how well democracy works in Eastern Europe, where if the political and economic reforms go well there, then Russia is more likely to be willing to adopt similar reforms, and then if the reforms in Russia go well, then China might be more inclined to make similar changes. In the Middle East, if Saudi Arabia undergoes a democratic transformation you could get a cascade of reform efforts across the Islamic world, since Saudi Arabia provides the financial backing and ideological support to many undemocratic regimes across the Middle East. Among poor countries, India has been at the vanguard of democratic political reform, where if India can succeed as an early adopter of democratic institutions, then this provides a clear example for other poor countries to follow as well.

The second part to any new strategy of democratization is going to confront the underlying security issues faced by undemocratic countries. If you look at existing democracies, a good portion of those countries (like NATO members, Japan, and South Korea) currently enjoy a security guarantee from the United States, and another large set of democratic countries were formerly British colonies. You also might be able to add in the countries in Central and South America covered by the Monroe Doctrine that prevents foreign interference into the internal political workings of countries in the Western Hemisphere. Clearly then, having a strong security relationship with the US or UK is a critical element to successful democratic development across the world, and any new strategy of democratization will have to see what kind of security relationship with the US or UK might be appropriate.

The third part to any new strategy of democratization is to find ways to increase economic growth. One clear predictor of successful democracies is that many of them are rich countries with a high per capita

income. This means that the richest countries are the most democratic, and the moderately wealthy countries are more democratic, while the poorest countries are the least democratic. Increasing a country's per capita income will allow them to progress more quickly from the less democratic categories to the more democratic categories, and improve their chances of successfully making important democratic reforms.

The fourth part to any new strategy of democratization is to improve the level of educational attainment in a country. There has been a recent push to improve education systems in the developing world, especially when it comes to primary and secondary schools, but improving systems of higher education is going to be important as well. Primary and secondary education is one of the most important predictors of successful democratic institutions in a country, but college graduation rates are also key to moving from a moderate income country to a high income country that makes democracy even more likely to do well.

The fifth part to any new democratization strategy will be to find ways to reduce corruption. Some of the most important countries to democratize, like Russia and Saudi Arabia, have enormous amounts of resource wealth that can make it difficult for democratic institutions to function well. The profits that can be generated from tapping those vast supplies of natural resources also creates incredibly powerful incentives to undermine the institutions that use that wealth for the public good rather than private gain. Many undemocratic countries do not have this particular problem of the resource curse, but many poor and middle income countries do have problems with corruption of their own, and resolving these corruption problems is one of the keys for democratic political institutions to gain the support and trust of the public. That makes an anti-corruption strategy a key part to any plan to democratize politically undemocratic countries.

Specific Proposals to Encourage Democratization

Thus far, this policy memo has identified three categories of undemocratic countries and five key parts to any strategy to encourage democratization there, which means there need to be 15 specific policy agendas in order to deal with all the complexity and priorities that have been identified so far. A comprehensive list would be beyond the scope of this particular analysis, but this policy memo can provide three specific ideas to help achieve greater levels of democratic reforms in each of the three separate categories of undemocratic countries.

In order to help achieve democratization in the former communist countries like Russia and China, the key is to make sure democracy succeeds in Eastern Europe. Currently, both Hungary and Poland are backsliding in their democratic reforms, and part of the problem is the massive outflow of people migrating from the poorer parts of Eastern Europe to the richer parts of Western Europe. This causes a significant amount of brain drain, where the people with the most talent and skills are the ones who are also most inclined to move to Western Europe. Unfortunately, it is also the most cosmopolitan and internationally minded people who are also the ones most likely to leave, and those are also the people most likely to support greater democratic political reforms in their country if they stayed. When a lot of those people leave, then that means it is the less skilled and nativist people who remain, who might not

be as inclined to protect the democratic institutions that have developed in those countries since the fall of communism.

As a result, one thing that could be done to promote greater democratic progress in Eastern European countries is to limit the ability of migrants from the poorer Eastern European countries to get work permits in the richer Western European countries. This was already done as a transition plan when those poorer Eastern European countries joined the EU, but perhaps the EU could reinstate some of those restrictions to stem the brain drain coming from Eastern Europe, and keep the skilled and democratically oriented remaining in their original country.

In order to help the Islamic Middle Eastern countries achieve greater levels of democratization, the US should probably revise its security relationship with Saudi Arabia. Right now, the US provides unconditional security aid to the country, where no matter how much they repress their own citizens or encourage authoritarianism across the Islamic world, the US stands by them, sends them arms, gives them advice on military strategy, and promises to come to their aid if they are ever attacked. The US should, from this point on, make their security guarantees conditional, where the US could promise to support Saudi Arabia from external invasion if they stop undermining democracy abroad, and the US could promise to protect Saudi Arabia from internal security threats as long as they make progress towards creating stronger democratic institutions in the country. Ideally, the US would still be a strong ally of Saudi Arabia, but by making their support conditional, then perhaps the country would be motivated to do more to support democracy at home and abroad, and then could serve as an example for other Islamic countries to follow. If Saudi Arabia went democratic, you might even have an incredible cascade of democratization across the Islamic world, much like what happened after the fall of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. This is perhaps a bit optimistic, but Saudi Arabia is clearly a key country in the Middle East and making progress on democratic reforms there will make it easier to achieve similar gains in other Islamic countries.

In order to help developing countries achieve greater levels of democratization, the US should allow more foreign students to study at US colleges and universities, much like they already do with India. Many countries are making significant gains getting more students to attend primary and secondary school, but lack the higher education infrastructure to allow them continue their education after high school. The US has tremendous capacity within their higher education system, and there are likely going to be demographic declines over the next ten years that will give colleges extra room to take on more students. Since foreign countries have the demand for higher education but lack the supply, and the US has the supply of higher education but lacks the demand, this is a perfect opportunity for the US to provide higher education opportunities to more people in developing countries. After they graduate, hopefully some will be allowed to stay and work in the US, but some will return home to improve life there, so that you can build networks that build the skills of foreign students in the US while also connecting them to the needs back home in their country. If done on a large scale this could help institute democratic values in a new generation of students while also speeding up economic growth over the long term.

Conclusion

Kant then was generally right over 200 years ago when he did see the possibility of perpetual peace through internal political reform. The world has made substantial progress in getting close to achieving peace through democratization, and there should be a new push to encourage this path of development to occur even faster. In general, there are three separate categories of undemocratic countries: the former communist countries, the Islamic Middle Eastern countries, and the poor developing countries in Africa and Asia. We also know that any plan to encourage democracy in those places needs to have a strategy to help key test case countries, to provide security guarantees to democratically inclined allies, to speed up economic growth, to encourage greater access to education, and to reduce corruption in countries striving to become more democratic. In particular, if policymakers are looking for specific reforms, Europe could reinstate limitations on work permits for Eastern European citizens seeking to move to Western Europe, the US could revise its security arrangement with Saudi Arabia to encourage greater democratic reforms there, and the US should allow more students from developing countries to study at US colleges and universities. These reforms clearly will not be enough to achieve our goal of universal democracy by itself, but should move us in the right direction, help set our priorities for future efforts, and make a difference in supporting democratic reforms in undemocratic countries.

References

Kant, Immanuel. 1795. Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay. London: S. Sonnenschein, 1903.