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"American Exceptionalism" for the 21st Century

The "indispensable nation" is still spreading authoritarianism around the world.



[Kate Kizer](#) Jul 26   [12](#)  [3](#)

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At last month’s Group of Seven (G7) summit, the annual convention for leaders of seven of the wealthiest countries in the world, US President Joe Biden [warned](#) that 21st century geopolitics will be dominated by a clash of systems of governance—a competition between democracies and autocracies, where only one *wins* and gets to determine the future of the world. This will be a zero-sum competition we can nevertheless fight, he insists, while still engaging in unprecedented global cooperation with otherwise irredeemable authoritarian regimes on issues like climate change and pandemics.

This is a simple message that we’ve [heard before](#): the world is made up of good and evil camps, accountable governance or the lack thereof being the main criterion for alignment. The United States, as the indispensable nation, and democracy itself are the only bulwarks against evil. This framing echoes the way Biden’s predecessor, Donald Trump, and his fellow demagogues around the world constantly yell that they alone can “fix it”—whatever “it” may be at any given time or place.

The indispensable nation is here. It's not dead ... yet.

After four years with a mentally unstable crook in the White House, it’s easy to understand why so many, particularly in Washington’s foreign policy establishment, might find Biden’s narrative compelling, and even calming. It would seem especially appealing to progressive activists in the United States, who have been courageously organizing for decades to fight back against illiberal encroachment here at home.

But amidst intensifying global human rights and climate crises, we can’t continue to gaslight ourselves that slapping pro-democracy rhetoric on zero-sum economic, ideological, and military [strategic competition](#) will make anyone’s lives better, [except those of the rich](#).

Rather than trying to make “American Exceptionalism for the 21st Century” happen, the president would be better off recognizing that the threat to democratic aspirations and human dignity around the world is not merely emanating from American “enemies” like China, Iran, or Cuba. It is also the United States’ behavior on the international stage and its own policies—at home and abroad—that enable and exacerbate an international climate of impunity for the dozens of human rights abusing governments that the US refuses to hold accountable in the name of “security.”

Apropos of nothing in particular, here’s Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman meeting with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin during a visit to Washington last month (Khalid bin Salman via Twitter)

To be clear: the rise of authoritarianism—and more specifically of right-wing nationalism—is a threat to the realization of a more peaceful world; and the current Chinese government, for example, is committing grave violations of international law against Uyghur Muslims, as well as against human rights activists. These phenomena *are* a fundamental challenge to the realization of human rights for all, and of the equitable and sustainable planet and society we need to build in order to ensure humanity’s survival. Long before the current “great power” fever pitch in Washington, [progressive leaders](#) have long [warned](#) about the rise of the global Right and of the intimate connections between mass inequality, global corruption, and rising authoritarianism and ethno-nationalism.

These warnings came to fruition in the January 6th assault on the United States Capitol. Yet six months later, the majority of one political party denies the gravity of a sitting president mobilizing armed white nationalist groups against democratically-elected representatives. There has been no accountability for those who voted to overturn the 2020 election results, or for the former president who incited these actions. Meanwhile, the other party plays into the former’s neofascism by prioritizing bipartisanship over the public good, refusing to eliminate the Jim Crow-vestige Senate filibuster to pass desperately needed structural reforms, and helping fan the flames of xenophobia and racism by legislating hardline, self-defeating anti-China policies in the name of “strategic competition.”

It’s within this context that we must place Biden’s attempt to rally democracies to organize against authoritarianism, and primarily against China. And thus far, the effort to “center human rights” in our policy toward China has involved mostly sticks and few or no carrots. Sinking into a dangerous cold war posture will do little to address Beijing’s human rights abuses or other apparent violations of international law. Instead it incentivizes one upmanship, tit-for-tat escalation, and brinkmanship from *both* sides, inviting violent conflict and economic warfare that will harm working people in the United States *and* China. It also threatens to reinforce the dangerous white nationalist forces solidifying power over the Republican party, a truly existential challenge to the future of the country.

If President Biden really wants to center human rights in his foreign policy and lead the world by example, his structural reforms cannot be confined within our borders and he cannot view the world through the lens of the last century. And it’s going to take a whole lot more than speeches about

collaboration with other wealthy countries.

We've seen this movie before.

In the midst of a pro-democracy quest, the United States isn't even finished fighting its last war and it's already set its sights on its next adversary. It would seem that in its [determination](#) that the "era of engagement is over," the US government is once again falling prey to the much publicized but false idea that more confrontation and more coercion will finally win the war.

This sentiment describes everything from the US entry into the Cold War (which is better understood as a series of *hot* proxy wars between two dominant competitors) to the so-called global war on terror (not to mention the far-reaching 'war on drugs'), the United States has lurched from ideological struggle to ideological struggle, in pursuit of an ominous 'other' who was the foreign and/or domestic enemy du jour.

Despite the rhetoric Biden and other American leaders use to portray the United States as an example to the world, the idea that the US is a beacon of democracy is a fairy tale we tell ourselves to justify policies that end up harming the very people we say we support. For decades, the US government has used everything from communism to political Islam as justification for its support of authoritarian governments—often military dictatorships—or armed nonstate groups around the world. The ideological confrontation the president is promising threatens to reinforce the wrong lesson from the last half century: that authoritarianism offers "stability." To many in Washington, the kind of phony-but-predictable, short-term "stability" offered by authoritarianism is preferable to riskier democracy in transactional allies who are merely useful pawns in a strategy of global domination.

Just writing that last clause felt bombastic and yet, in case after case, whether it's Yemen, Guatemala, the Philippines, or Afghanistan, US foreign policy has prioritized authoritarian strongmen who can bring "stability" to the country and support US interests over ordinary people and the democratic aspirations they hold. Around the world, the concepts of "human rights" and "democracy" have been used for decades as excuses for US-sponsored authoritarian power grabs and the co-optation of the democratic process by state violence, government-sponsored propaganda, covert warfare, and elite impunity.

This is not to say that human rights and democracy have no place in US foreign policy. I am not a denialist (and if you don't know what that is referencing, take 5 minutes and [read this](#)). On the contrary, I believe the failure of US foreign policy writ large, and the key deficit of Biden's "reviving democracy" strategy is not centering human rights, needs, and dignity *enough*. Instead, it appears democracy and human rights will continue to be a useful cudgel against adversaries, even as we look the other way when our allies—or we ourselves—violate those same principles.

To bomb or not to bomb—are we really still asking that question?

Recent debates in Washington about military intervention in Haiti and Cuba—two countries that have been devastated by decades of disastrous and human rights-harming US policies—are revealing: A recent New York Times [headline and subheader](#) says it all: "U.S. Habit of Backing Strongman Allies Fed Turmoil in Haiti. Washington dismissed warnings that democracy was unraveling under President Jovenel Moïse, leaving a gaping leadership void after his assassination."

Yet again, we see struggles for human rights, democratic change, and human dignity in Haiti and Cuba being [co-opted by right-wing forces](#) in the United States to justify ever more military spending, support for anyone who will guarantee access for US capital, and ever-tightening economic sanctions. So far, Democrats have largely failed to come up with an alternative to discredit these voices while still advocating for the centrality of democratic values in US policy making.

Biden is right to see the threat of unfettered authoritarianism, but any strategy to counteract it must be grounded in the impacts of US foreign policy in recent history. Dozens of military interventions and economic warfare in the name of democracy have, over the past two decades, created massive, lasting harm to human rights, accountable governance, and the future well-being of these societies (Afghanistan, 2001; Iraq, Yemen, Pakistan, 2002; Somalia, 2005; the Philippines, 2006; Libya, 2011, Nigeria, Iraq, Syria, 2014; you get the picture).

In addition to these interventions, the US has [spent billions](#) on so-called "train and equip" security assistance, as the Pentagon has increasingly come to rely on military interoperability with foreign partners to fight its conflicts. Rather than more democracy, this has led to the militarization of other countries' approach to safety, and enhanced the capabilities of authoritarian governments to silence dissent and consolidate power. Academic literature has shown that US foreign military training [doubles](#) the chances of a subsequent military coup d'état and that providing weapons and security assistance to foreign militaries, rather than buying influence, actually [incentivizes](#) behavior at odds with stated US security goals.

Meanwhile, the United States has shown a flagrant disregard for abiding by what Biden and other [call](#) the "rules-based order," a construct that, in its various iterations since the end of World War II, has largely served to prop up US imperialism and reify US impunity. Whether it's sanctioning International Criminal Court prosecutors for investigating war crimes in Afghanistan or blocking every international attempt to hold the Israeli government accountable for its treatment of the Palestinians, Washington has modeled a "justice for thee, not for me" approach that only strengthens authoritarianism. When Trump and John Bolton started using the language of sovereignty, which is authoritarian speak for "piss off," it was merely saying the quiet part out loud with respect to decades of US policy towards the international community.

The United States has, in many cases, made military, not diplomatic, approaches its options of first resort. A critical look back at our attempts to bomb our way to peace (and teaching others to do the same), to contain/decapitate/undermine ideological enemies, has empowered the very anti-democratic forces we say we're against—an inevitable result of demonizing and dehumanizing entire populations on the basis of whether or not their government's actions comport with Washington's agenda.

If the president truly wants to strengthen democracy internationally, it's going to be extremely difficult when the US military [bombs](#) whomever it wants and continues to arm, partner, and train with anti-democratic regimes that instrumentalize the language of human rights to justify more militarism, violence, and oppression. It also doesn't help that Biden's Department of Justice (DOJ) continues to [defend weapons sales](#) to human rights abusers in court.

If we're going to lead by example, do it. I dare you.

If we're going to actually rally democracies then it must be in pursuit of the world we need, not of the world the DC foreign policy establishment prefers. We must acknowledge that the traditional manichean US foreign policy approach will not dismantle the power systems necessary to address the global challenges we face in the coming decades. Engaging in zero-sum economic and military competition with the Chinese government, for example, will sink, not uplift, the president's project to revive democracy. So long as the US government frames competition between the two largest economies in the world as an ideological fight for who will govern the world, it will hamper cooperation on climate, and allow the Chinese government to frame even legitimate human rights criticism as imperial propaganda.

Focusing on discrediting nationalism (particularly ethnonationalism) as well as other tools of state violence like counterterrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) would be a better, more timely, and more apt focus for the Biden administration if it wants to strengthen the power of pro-democracy activists around the world. But so long as the US only focuses on democracy and human rights as a means of punishing and shaming, it will fail to achieve any meaningful improvement in these areas. If Biden genuinely wants to win the contest against authoritarianism then his foreign policy must address the many ways the United States has empowered and continues to empower authoritarians and illiberal social movements around the world.



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[Ken](#)
[Aug 1](#)

This was a really interesting piece, Kate. I've been wondering a lot lately about the "denialism" you mentioned. I do think there's something to be said for the fact that US citizens like me can only (directly, anyway) influence policy of the US itself.

Given the fact that we all have a finite amount of time and mental energy, it's not surprising that a lot of people on the left default to denialism on various issues. I don't think it's good by any means, but it seems inevitable that it would arise as a heuristic when even a single issue, like Xinjiang, is too complicated for a lot of people to keep on top of during their lunch breaks.

I wish there were specific pressure points people could use to prevent the US government from maintaining these counter-productive, reductionist policies. Like an international relations version of voting rights legislation-- which I think is always a good thing with even more cascading benefits. Instead, we're limited to voting on candidates who might be "strong on China," but "weak on Iran," or vice versa, or just varying degrees of "strong on China" without any indication of how that rhetoric actually manifests in the real world.

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Excellent work. I think the core challenge is that the the United States' incentive structure is fully weighted toward short term competition over long-term cooperation. Why would the US set up long-term cooperative structures that may undermine its dominance when it can compete and dominate NOW with its military might and economic power? This a classic game theory problem and it's incredible difficult to imagine how to alter those material incentives.

On a moral level I think the problem is that this incentive structure results in treating other states (and, by extension, the REAL PEOPLE living within those states) in a purely instrumental way. Regardless of the diplomatic gloss applied to any situation, the US sees, understands, and treats other countries and people PURELY as means to its own ends. The US absolutely DOES NOT CARE about the people of Haiti or China or Yemen or Iraq. It does not care whatsoever. The US ONLY cares about reifying, perpetuating, and expanding its status quo global dominance (economically, militarily, etc.) and if that means the people of Haiti/China/Iran suffer forever then so be it.

To broaden out, I would argue that this is the basis for all empires throughout time: they are deeply incentivized to (1) dominate and maintain hegemony in the short-term and (2) treat all other states and peoples as purely instrumental means to their own ends.

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