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The Twilight of Human-Rights Diplomacy



President Donald Trump in Brussels, July 11.

by Walter Russell Mead

President Trump's abandonment of democracy promotion and human rights is among the most striking of his departures from the post-Cold War American foreign-policy consensus. To the despair and fury of liberal internationalists and neoconservatives alike, Mr. Trump often appears determined to conduct American diplomacy as if human rights abroad were not a concern.

But the human-rights recession in U.S. foreign policy was already under way when the president took office. It isn't hard to see why: Efforts to base America's foreign policy on human rights and democracy hadn't been yielding their desired results for some time.

Think back to 2011, when President Obama knew where the arc of history was headed and planned to steer American policy accordingly. As the Arab Spring toppled Hosni Mubarak, Ben Rhodes told reporters the administration believed "there is not going to be a return to the way things were in Egypt." The people had spoken, tyranny was broken, and Egyptian democracy was here to stay.

Those were heady times. Recep Tayyip Erdogan was creating an "Islamist democracy" in Turkey. Aung San Suu Kyi was being compared to Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela for her reformist advocacy in Burma.

Also in 2011, the "international community" proposed a new concept to change the way the world worked: the "responsibility to protect." The U.S. intervention in Libya, we were told, established a new principle in international law that dictators could no longer massacre their people with impunity.

This sunny worldview couldn't long withstand the cold realities of geopolitics. After Libya, Mr. Obama's appetite for human-rights interventions diminished abruptly. Here he was reflecting public sentiment. Americans still believed in human rights and democracy, but they had lost confidence in the ability of policy experts to advance these principles effectively on the world stage.

Meanwhile, the rise of powerful states actively hostile to open societies changed the international calculus. American human-rights sanctions mean less when Russia and China stand ready to lend autocrats a hand. And the U.S. cannot, for example, simultaneously undermine the military leaders of Thailand and ask them to help limit China's influence.

In a world of heightened geopolitical competition, Wilsonian idealism began to seem at best a distraction and at worst an obstacle to sound strategic thinking. By 2016 many Americans were tired of spending money and sometimes blood on humanitarian interventions and democracy initiatives that rarely went well. This is one reason Mr. Trump, whose "America First" sloganeering seemed to

some voters like a refreshing burst of common sense, overthrew both the Republican and Democratic establishments in 2016. The neoconservatives and liberal internationalists who staffed previous administrations were sidelined. The president delights in ostentatiously rejecting their advice.

But pure realpolitik is a strategic dead end. While the mix of overreach and underthink that characterized both parties' Wilsonian foreign-policy consensus has been rightly repudiated, American foreign policy can't operate without a moral component. To attract and hold allies, the U.S. must stand for something higher than its own wealth and power, and "Make America Great Again" plays better in Des Moines than Dusseldorf. Henry Kissinger learned in the 1970s that a democratic society cannot sustain a foreign policy that does not defer in some way to its people's moral aspirations. The Khashoggi affair underscores this enduring truth.

Already, human-rights concerns are insinuating themselves back into the Trump agenda. China's sins are not limited to mercantilist trade policies and intellectual-property theft. The ugly persecution of minority religious and ethnic groups, the suppression of dissent, and the bullying of smaller nations are also part of the American indictment. U.S. denunciations of human-rights violations in countries like China, Venezuela and Iran ring hollow unless Americans are seen to honor the standards we demand of others.

That said, the human-rights and democracy lobbies need to use their time-out wisely. Mistakes in foreign policy are unavoidable; the question is whether one learns from them. The Wilsonians need to develop a full and serious account of what went wrong over the past 20 years, then put forward a more modest and realistic approach to the moral goals that remain a necessary part of America's role in the world.