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# When the U.S. Gives Up on Human Rights, Everyone Suffers

The United States needs to make sure that those fighting against repression and injustice all around the world know that they have not been forgotten.

By [Shannon N. Green](#)

Women hold candles and placards against US President Donald Trump during a vigil to mark International Women's Day (IWD) in Hong Kong on March 8, 2017. / AFP PHOTO / Anthony WALLACE (Photo credit should read ANTHONY WALLACE/AFP/Getty Images)

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Last month, the White House [unveiled](#) its “hard power” budget blueprint, which proposed a \$54-billion increase in defense and national security spending, along with massive cuts to foreign assistance and multilateral funding. President Donald Trump intended the budget to send a message to allies and adversaries alike that the United States will put American security and interests first. Absent from this document was any mention of the values and freedoms that have long been the foundation of U.S. foreign policy. This is a mistake. Despotism and kleptocratic governments all over the world will take this as proof that they have carte blanche to crack down on their citizens, while human rights defenders will conclude that they have been abandoned by the United States. More importantly, such sentiments threaten the global norms and alliances that have propelled American prosperity and security since the end of World War II.

It is too early to tell how the promotion of human rights will feature in this administration's foreign policy. On Monday, the White House notably called on Russia to release all of the peaceful protesters detained during large anti-corruption protests over the weekend. Press Secretary Sean Spicer [went further](#), underscoring the right of people everywhere to accountable government and to “exercise their rights without fear of retribution.” This was the first mention by the Trump administration of human rights abuses in Russia or elsewhere, and was a positive first step. However, it came on the heels of many statements and indications that the administration will put human rights on the back burner.

For example, the president [called](#) Abdel Fattah al-Sisi a “fantastic guy,” in spite of the Egyptian strongman's attempts to muzzle the media, independent civil society organizations, and others who dare to speak out against his rule. Trump apparently endorsed Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs that has been responsible for the unlawful killing of over 7,000 suspected drug dealers and users. Rumors abound that the administration is considering pulling out of the U.N. Human Rights Council, an international body that has been greatly strengthened by America's engagement. And the White House seems to be in favor of [moving forward](#) with the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Bahrain, despite the government's intensified clampdown on the political opposition and plan to try civilians in military courts.

Of course, U.S. global leadership on democracy and human rights is not merely based on what it says or does overseas. What matters more is the example that America sets. By that measure, the Trump administration has already significantly eroded U.S. credibility. Why would another country listen to the United States about protecting vulnerable populations, given perceptions that the immigration and refugee executive order was religiously motivated? What authority does America have standing up for besieged journalists when the president of the United States has [tweeted](#) that the news media is the “enemy of the American People?” How can U.S. diplomats press security partners to protect civilians during military operations while the White House is [contemplating](#) loosening drone strike restrictions that seek to prevent civilian casualties? Rights-abusing countries will have a much easier time brushing away U.S. criticisms of their behavior so long as these deficiencies persist at home.

Authoritarian governments — weary of the United States prodding them on human rights and critical of what they perceive as Western meddling in their sovereign affairs — are likely celebrating this turn of events. The president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, [welcomed](#) Trump's election and heralded an era of greater cooperation. Increasingly rebuked by the Obama administration for his consolidation of power and crackdown on the military and judiciary, especially after a failed coup attempt in July 2016, Erdogan has much to gain by the United States looking the other way as Turkey creeps toward authoritarianism. Countries from Saudi Arabia to Cambodia appear less inhibited in going after political opponents, assuming that Trump's election means that they will get a free pass on human rights violations.

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By no means is authoritarian retrenchment a new phenomenon. For the past decade, governments have been dismantling democratic institutions and curtailing human rights. Freedom House has [documented](#) 11 straight years in which there have been more declines in political and civil liberties than gains. However, the United States often served as a check on the worst impulses of autocrats. Without a champion of human rights in the White House, such regimes will likely go unchallenged as they commit egregious abuses and power grabs.

This capitulation would have major security and economic consequences for the United States and its closest allies. In addition to the moral imperative, America has strong interests in supporting democracy and human rights abroad.

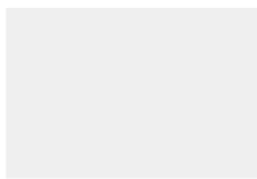
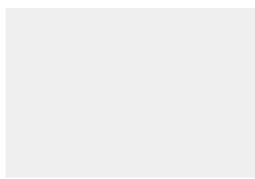
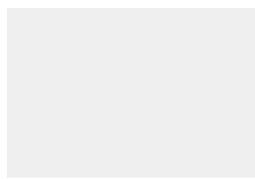
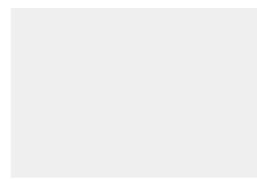
First, democratic countries make the best, most stable partners. Democracies are [more likely](#) to form alliances and cooperate with other democracies and less likely to get embroiled in conflict. The U.S. military understands the value of having partners that respect human rights and the rule of law, and thus invests billions a year in enhancing the professionalism of security forces overseas. Recent research has deepened our understanding of the benefits for American security of having broad and deep ties to other countries. In a [statistical analysis](#) of Muslim-majority countries' cooperation with the United States on counterterrorism, Peter S. Henne found states that received more foreign assistance were more collaborative than those that did not. Conversely, emboldened dictators [tend to pursue](#) foreign policy agendas that are erratic and destructive for the United States and its allies. North Korean ruler Kim Jong Un's spate of nuclear tests and missile launches and Russian President Vladimir Putin's annexation of Crimea and incursions into eastern Ukraine are emblematic of the kind of aggressive behavior the international community has come to expect from autocratic leaders.

Second, contrary to the president's assertions, the United States has benefitted immensely from the liberal world order that it helped create. From the ashes of World War II, America invested in interlocking political and economic institutions, alliances, and norms — based on universal human rights, shared values, and the rule of law — that would prevent large-scale conflict and displacement in the future and fuel Europe's recovery from the war. The United States has been both the primary engine and beneficiary of this liberal international order. To be clear, inequality has been a terrible byproduct of this system — and too many have been left behind. But, far from being victimized by globalization, the United States has enjoyed nearly 70 years of unparalleled influence because of its investment in the promotion of democracy and human rights.

Finally, U.S. support for democracy and human rights matters in people's lives. It is true that the United States has been far from perfect in championing human rights, especially where America has short-term security interests. Yet there is no other country that can substitute for the United States when it comes to fighting for universal freedoms. American presidents, members of Congress, and cabinet secretaries have personally intervened to get political prisoners released from jail, prevent genocide, and bring war criminals to justice. The solidarity expressed by U.S. political and civil leaders has provided sustenance and hope to human rights defenders in the grimmest conditions. An Egyptian activist once pulled a speech given by President Barack Obama on the vital contributions of civil society out of his pocket and said to me, “When I heard these words, I knew I wasn't alone.”

At a moment in which the forces of nationalism, authoritarianism, and hatred threaten to tear our societies apart again, the United States needs to make sure that those bravely fighting against repression and injustice all around the world know that they have not been forgotten.

Photo credit: ANTHONY WALLACE/AFP/Getty Images

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