Barack Obama’s democracy promotion at midterm

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This article analyses the Obama administration’s approach to the promotion of democracy and human rights at three levels: of ideas, of strategy and of policy. It argues that it has displayed a conventional understanding of the place of democracy in US foreign policy. Democracy promotion has been given a place in Obama’s strategy of engagement, which aims to build up and increase the number of democratic states able to partner with the United States in solving global problems. The aim is to achieve this by a dual-track engagement with countries under autocratic regimes and through a ‘new-old’ emphasis on the democracy-development nexus. Obama’s first two budget requests show that there is no intention to reduce spending on democracy promotion, but his diplomacy has been inconsistent in reacting to various democratization developments around the world. The administration still has to convince that engagement can accommodate consistently democracy promotion in foreign policy on a case-by-case, daily basis.

Keywords: Barack Obama; US foreign policy; democracy promotion; human rights development

I. Introduction

Debating whether President Barack Obama believes that the promotion of democracy and human rights has an important place in US foreign policy has been something of a popular parlour game in Washington since he took office. Does he belong in a democracy tradition that has influenced so many of his predecessors in their approach to international affairs?1 Doubts were sown within the democracy promotion ‘community’ almost from the moment the new president concluded an inauguration speech that did not contain the word ‘democracy’ – a first since Ronald Reagan in 1981 – and only three instances of the word ‘freedom’ compared to 24 in George W. Bush’s speech in 2005.2 This impression was reinforced during the Senate confirmation hearing of Hillary Rodham Clinton as secretary of state, when she said that the three pillars of US foreign policy should be the ‘three Ds’ of defence, diplomacy and development, leaving observers to wonder whether the fourth ‘D’ of democracy was being abandoned.3 Ever since, officials and their critics have batted arguments back and forth as to whether the Obama administration ‘does’ democracy promotion (DP), while observers have tried to divine the president’s beliefs on this subject. Is he a foreign-policy realist, unwilling to let values get in the way of the pursuit of the American national interest, or is he a liberal internationalist who, from personality and circumstance, has eschewed the bombast of his predecessor?4

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In this article, democracy promotion is defined as the widest possible range of actions that one state can take to influence the political development of another towards greater democratization. These potential actions can be thought of as different points along a DP scale, the range of which is delimited by the degree of interventionism on the part of the promoter. In theory, at least, this can go from the low interventionism of DP by diplomacy, exhortation and example, to – very controversially – the use of military power abroad, with much more common intermediate policies such as democracy assistance (i.e. various forms capacity-building support to different actors and institutions abroad), political conditional- ity, economic sanctions or direct support for democracy actors abroad between the two extremes.

This article reviews the Obama administration’s approach to democracy promotion at the midterm point. One challenge in any discussion of DP, at least from the perspective of the foreign policy of countries that engage in it, is that the term covers potentially several different concepts and ideas simultaneously. The place and role of DP in American foreign policy can be best understood as a phenomenon playing itself out at three levels: of ideas; of strategy, and of policy. Positing these three conceptual or analytical levels helps to unpack the concept of DP from a foreign policy perspective. It is certainly possible to study a country’s DP at any one of these levels alone but it is important to be aware at least of all three, how they are linked and how they flow from one to the other. In the case of the United States, the ideational level is the one at which a tradition of democracy thinking has historically influenced how international affairs are conceived, as well as the place of the country within them. At the strategic level, these ideational influences lead American policy-makers to define the national interest and how it is to be pursued through what can be described as grand strategy in terms that include the nature of the political order in other states. And finally the policy level of DP is where the pursuit of the resulting US strategic goals (e.g. in the security and economic spheres) must be implemented through the wide range of policies, actions and decisions that an administration must take on an almost daily basis.

This article applies this conceptual framework to assess the Obama administration so far on each of these levels. It looks first at the president’s earlier Senate positions, his appointments and his early rhetoric on democracy promotion in office. It then investigates whether there is, under Obama, a particular or even new DP rhetoric and framework to justify including democracy and human rights within US grand strategy. The article then looks at whether this putative new framework has been implemented so far at the policy level. The record so far indicates that it cannot be said that the president and his administration have rejected the idea that promotion of democracy and human rights have a place in US foreign policy. This article argues that the Obama administration is reinterpreting the democracy tradition in US foreign policy in light of its own strategic priorities and diplomatic style, and turning the prism of democracy promotion towards a better alignment with how it views America’s role and needs in the world. This is not something new. In recent decades, American presidents have reinterpreted and adapted the democracy tradition to fit their strategic priorities and political inclinations – see Jimmy Carter with human rights in a post-Vietnam and post-Watergate context, Ronald Reagan and anti-communism in the last decade of the Cold War, Bill Clinton and American economic renewal within post-Cold War globalisation or George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism after 9/11.

Obama has clearly displayed a conventional, liberal internationalist understanding of the place of DP in US foreign policy, as have many of his appointees – even if it can be argued that they have been slow in developing their rhetoric once in office. Obama’s first National Security Strategy shows that DP has a place in his strategy of engagement, which aims to build up and increase the number of democratic states able to be partners...
to the United States in solving global problems. The aim is to achieve this by a dual-track engagement with countries under autocratic regimes and through a ‘new-old’ emphasis on the democracy-development nexus. At the policy level, Obama’s first two budget requests show that there is no intention to reduce spending on DP, but his diplomacy has been inconsistent in reacting to various democratization developments around the world (as shown in the cases of Iran, Honduras and Afghanistan). Therefore, the administration still has to convince observers that its strategy of engagement can accommodate consistently democracy promotion in the formulation of foreign policy on a case-by-case basis.

II. The ideational level of Obama’s democracy promotion

President Obama is frequently described as a man of a pragmatic, rational and realistic bent. This has fed the impression that his foreign policy is more concerned with calculating and securing American interests than with promoting values of democracy and human rights. Yet most of his words and actions since going into politics indicate that he has a fairly traditional American liberal internationalist mindset, albeit one balanced by his temperament. His brief stint as a senator provides some evidence that he shares a standard liberal Washington worldview based on ideas such as the democratic peace and interdependence. In terms of democracy promotion, Obama was one of the co-sponsors of the ADVANCE Democracy Act introduced by Senator John McCain in 2005 (which failed to pass through Congress, before another version was enacted in 2007). That same year, he introduced in the Senate the Democratic Republic of the Congo Relief, Security, and Democracy Promotion Act, which was signed into law in 2006. Speaking in 2006, he declared:

We do need to stand for democracy. And I will. But democracy is more than a ballot box. America must show – through deeds as well as words – that we stand with those who seek a better life. … I will focus our support on helping nations build independent judicial systems, honest police forces, and financial systems that are transparent and accountable. Freedom also means freedom from want, not freedom lost to an empty stomach. So I’ll make poverty reduction a key part of helping other nations reduce chaos and anarchy.

While running for the presidency, Obama called for raising American aid to $50 billion per year by 2012, partly with the goal of assisting democratisation and reforming corrupt governments; said he would increase funding for the National Endowment for Democracy and democracy NGOs; and mentioned ambitious ideas for rebuilding failed or failing states and to support dissidents and reformers. It should also be noted that the co-head of Obama’s foreign policy team during the 2008 election was Tony Lake, the National Security Advisor who had pushed a democracy agenda during Bill Clinton’s first term.

If Obama showed signs of being ideationally inclined towards the notion of democracy promotion before his election, this impression is reinforced by his appointment of several people who are similarly inclined. The president’s senior and mid-level appointments include many prominent figures with a well established record of being predisposed towards, championing or being active in DP in its various forms. Both Secretary of State Clinton and Vice-President Joe Biden can be described as liberal interventionists or liberal hawks, with a record going back to the main foreign policy debates of the Clinton presidency in the 1990s. Not surprisingly, many Obama foreign policy appointees served in the Clinton administration, which marked a step-change in the incorporation of DP within US foreign policy. The most notable Obama appointees in terms of DP are Anne-Marie Slaughter as director of policy planning for the State Department, Susan
Rice as ambassador to the United Nations, and Michael McFaul and Samantha Power within the National Security Council. One can also note Michael Posner (the founder of Human Rights First) and Thomas Melia as, respectively, assistant secretary and deputy assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor, as well as Tamara Coffman Wittes as deputy assistant secretary of state for near Eastern affairs, Sarah Mendelson as deputy assistant administrator for USAID, Jeremy Weinstein as director for democracy in the NSC, and Ivo Daalder as ambassador to NATO. These people came into the administration with substantial DP baggage that they have not given any sign of jettisoning since.

The Obama administration’s democracy promotion rhetoric that has gradually emerged reflects the ideational influence that was to be expected from the background of the president and such appointees. Barack Obama and his foreign policy principals spent much of 2009 trying to show domestic and international audiences that the new president was the polar opposite of Bush in foreign policy. And, since Bush’s trumpeting of the ‘Freedom Agenda’ had been so central to his foreign policy rhetoric and provoked so much adverse reaction, nowhere perhaps was this deliberate change of style and tone more flagrant than in relation to democracy promotion. As most in the DP community have pointed out, there was an urgent need to ‘detoxify’ the very idea of it after the Bush years, which provides the backdrop to much of the concern about Obama’s presumed neglect of democracy and human rights. The administration also appeared to acknowledge the DP community’s long-voiced criticism of the persistent mismatch over time between inflated American rhetoric and limited or contradictory actions. As Michael McFaul told The New York Times, soon after Obama’s inauguration and before his appointment to the NSC, the United States ‘should seek to achieve small, concrete outcomes that advance political reforms in very tangible ways and do so, without talking about doing so. [It should] talk less and do more’. The deliberate downplaying of the democracy rhetoric emanating from Washington through most of 2009, however, does not mean that Obama completely ignored the issue. In his speech in Cairo on 4 June 2009, the president made his first high-profile statement on the subject:

I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn’t steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.

The Cairo speech provided an early indication of a desire to expand the conception of democracy commonly used in US foreign policy to go beyond elections and narrowly conceived political institutions towards a broader range of rights of a more economic and social nature. This message was reinforced the following month when Obama, speaking during his trip to Ghana, stressed the importance for solving Africa’s problems and driving development of supporting democratic governments that fight corruption and govern effectively.

Heading towards the end of its first year, the Obama administration began to expound its views on democracy and human rights to a greater extent. Addressing the United Nations General Assembly on 23 September 2009, the president stated that ‘democracy and human rights are essential to achieving each of the goals that I’ve discussed today’ — namely nuclear non-proliferation, peace and security, environmental preservation and a just global economy. While accepting the Nobel peace prize in Oslo on 11 December, he
argued that any just peace among states depended on universal values of human rights. Furthermore, a just peace among states also required them to guarantee the rights of their citizens to economic opportunity and development. Responding to his critics, Obama argued that promoting human rights cannot be done by exhortation alone and that diplomacy and engagement are needed, not least with regimes that are autocratic or have a poor human rights record. Indeed, one notable example of US engagement at the multilateral level has been in rejoining the UN Human Rights Council. At the same time, Hillary Clinton argued in a speech at Georgetown University that the administration was pursuing a policy of ‘principled pragmatism’ in engaging authoritarians, in which the decision to raise human rights publicly or behind closed doors was based on what would work best in each case and would not be separated from the broader agenda of the bilateral relations. According to her, this engagement was constructed on the recognition of a link between development, democracy and human rights, on the need for flexible tactics, and on a focus beyond the governments of other states to their societies at large.

After one year in office, the administration clearly grew less shy in talking up democracy and human rights. For Robert Kagan, the administration began to revert to Clinton-era ‘traditional Democratic interventionist hawkishness... married to an equally enduring Democratic tradition of idealistic globalism and institution-building’. That Obama does not ‘do’ democracy is very much a 2009 trope that is proving hard to shake off, therefore, rather than a reflection of reality. While the statements cited above, and others like them from other members of the administration throughout 2009, avoided the grandiose rhetoric that American presidents have tended to espouse, they did reveal some of the contours and broad aspirations for a vision of democracy within a universal human rights perspective with an emphasis on what could be called ‘developmental’ rights. This still required considerable fleshing out, however, and the second year of the Obama presidency saw the emergence of a more detailed rationale and blueprint for what could be his strategic framework for US democracy promotion.

The strategic level of Obama’s democracy promotion: a ‘new-old’ framework?

Within a time frame of two years, assessing the Obama administration’s democracy promotion at the strategic level becomes more challenging, not least because of the wider debate over what exactly is the president’s grand strategy — if any. At the end of 2009, it was still possible to be unsure exactly how to define Obama’s foreign policy. Fareed Zakaria’s comment that ‘Obama is searching for a post-imperial policy in the midst of an imperial crisis’, while directed at Afghanistan policy specifically, could just as well serve for the whole of his foreign policy. In the absence of an early statement of grand strategy, it was easy for Obama’s critics to see many of his foreign policy moves as justification for accusing him of abandoning DP. For them, the president appeared to seek to achieve his foreign-policy goals by dealing with other countries without being much influenced by whether they were democracies or dictatorships — for example, in Joshua Muravchik’s words seeking ‘peace through moral equivalence’ between the two. The mitigating factor, from the administration’s point of view, is that it has had to deal with a daunting list of priorities: winding down the US military campaign in Iraq, devising and implementing the military surge in Afghanistan, attending to the consequences of the ‘Great Recession’ and introducing major healthcare reform. With such politically demanding tasks, it is perhaps not surprising that the Obama administration was not as fast as some would have liked in revealing its approach to DP. Also contributing to any slowness of this emerging approach within a greater foreign policy strategy was the decision to embark on two
lengthy policy-review processes, the Presidential Study Directive on US Global Develop-
ment Policy and the State Department’s Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, 
both launched in July 2009 and taking more than a year to complete.

The label that has stuck as the most accurate – so far – for Obama’s grand strategy or 
foreign policy doctrine is ‘engagement’. The aptness of this description was confirmed with 
the release of the president’s National Security Strategy (as mandated by Congress) in May 
2010.18 Obama’s first NSS is a standard statement of, and argument for, the place of democ-

racy in US foreign policy as an enabler or guarantor of the country’s security and economic 
interests. The president of the National Democratic Institute, Kenneth Wollack, points out 
that the NSS ‘mentions democracy and related concepts more than 160 times’.19 In essence, 
this could have been a Clinton NSS (or even in places a Bush NSS, except for the means to 
be used). The document states that America’s national interest rests on four pillars: security, 
prosperity, universal values and an international order that allows stronger cooperation to 
meet global challenges. In the NSS, many of the democracy and human rights ideas that 
the administration had floated came into sharper focus. The overarching theme that the 
United States should pursue its interests ‘through an international system in which all 
nations have certain rights and responsibilities’20 was reiterated. The starting point for 
US policy towards securing collective action on shared problems would be through 
comprehensive diplomatic engagement with other countries of all stripes. The purpose of 
America’s engagement – and democracy promotion within it – is to:

...strengthen the regional partners we need to help us stop conflicts and counter global criminal 
networks; build a stable, inclusive global economy with new sources of prosperity; advance 
democracy and human rights; and ultimately position ourselves to better address key global 
challenges by growing the ranks of prosperous, capable, and democratic states that can be 
our partners in the decades ahead. [Emphasis added]21

American policy should therefore aim to ‘address the underlying political and economic 
deficits that foster instability, enable radicalization and extremism, and ultimately under-
mine the ability of governments to manage threats within their borders and to be our part-
ners in addressing common challenges.’22

Placing democracy and human rights within this strategy, the salient points of the NSS 
are that the United States should:

• Welcome (though, it should be noted, not necessarily support) democracy move-

ments that do not engage in violence;
• Assist developing countries, and fragile democracies in particular, to develop account-

able and democratic institutions that serve basic human needs – social and economic 
as well as political;
• Integrate human rights in its dialogue with repressive governments; and
• Engage foreign peoples, especially through civil society, as well their governments.

The section of the NSS headed ‘Promote Democracy and Human Rights Abroad’ fleshes 
out how the Obama administration envisions doing the above.23 Above all, ‘The United 
States must support democracy, human rights, and development together, as they are 
mutually reinforcing. [Because] democracies without development rarely survive.’24 
From this follows a vision of democracy and human rights that can be promoted within 
and alongside a developmental approach that includes economic opportunity, the fight 
against corruption, food security, health, the rights of women and girls, and humanitarian
assistance. In more ‘traditional’ or ‘political’ DP areas, the focus is very much on a
dual-track engagement with both the governments and civil societies of countries that are
not democratic, with a special emphasis on facilitating the spread of information and
communication technologies that can enable civil society organizations campaigning for
democracy and human rights.

The first Obama NSS makes it clear that the administration’s foreign policy and democ-
ratization rationale is that, if it is to enlist others in the quest to solve the global pro-
blems it fears most, the United States also needs to help them solve domestic political,
social and economic problems. This is because it needs an increase in the number of
states that are developed enough to have a greater capability to deliver solutions at both
the domestic and international levels. Secretary Clinton reiterated that this was at the
heart of the strategy of engagement in a speech at the Council on Foreign Relations:

America’s security and prosperity depend more than ever on the ability of others to take respon-
sibility for defusing threats and meeting challenges in their own countries and regions. That’s
why a second step in our strategy for global leadership is to help develop the capacity of devel-
oping partners; … Our approach is not, however, development for development’s sake. It is an
integrated strategy for solving problems. … So our goal is to establish productive relationships
that survive the times when we do not agree, and that enable us to continue to work together.
And a central element of that is to engage directly with the people of these nations. [And at the
multilateral level,] there must continue to be an emphasis on democracy, human rights and the
rule of law so that they are cemented into the foundations of these institutions.25

Such a strategy also includes enlisting the support of emerging democratic powers in the
hope that their foreign policy will align itself with the goals of American DP. Therefore,
when President Obama addressed the Indian parliament on 8 November 2010, he
reproached his hosts for a lack of democracy concerns in their country’s foreign policy,
with particular reference to India’s relationship with Myanmar’s military dictatorship:

Faced with such gross violations of human rights, it is the responsibility of the international
community – especially leaders like the United States and India – to condemn it. And if I
can be frank, in international fora, India has often shied away from some of these issues.
But speaking up for those who cannot do so for themselves is not interfering in the affairs
of other countries. It’s not violating the rights of sovereign nations. It is staying true to our
democratic principles. It is giving meaning to the human rights that we say are universal. …
So promoting shared prosperity, preserving peace and security, strengthening democratic
governance and human rights – these are the responsibilities of leadership.26

Throughout 2010 it became clearer that the Obama administration does not reject democra-
tisation abroad as a goal of US foreign policy. Instead it interprets it to a considerable extent
through the lens of development. Ultimate evidence of this was given by the president twice
in the space of two days in September 2010. On 22 September, Obama unveiled the first US
Global Development Policy, the outcome of his Presidential Policy Directive, and
addressed the UN Millennium Development Goals Summit in New York.27 He called
global development a ‘core pillar of American power’ and that said that American develop-
ment policy would from now on focus on economic growth and democratic governance. The
Global Development Policy and the UN speech fleshed out further the ideas in the NSS for
supporting the development of institutional capacity, entrepreneurship, accountability,
anti-corruption efforts, the rule of law, civil society, human rights, and especially the rights
of women and girls. (The role of Hillary Clinton in driving a ‘gender agenda’ within
the State Department and raising the profile of the rights of women and girls within
Democracy, more than any other form of government, delivers for our citizens... The ultimate success of democracy in the world won’t come because the United States dictates it; it will come because individual citizens demand a say in how they are governed. There is no soil where this notion cannot take root, just as every democracy reflects the uniqueness of a nation... In all parts of the world, we see the promise of innovation to make government more open and accountable. And now, we must build on that progress. And when we gather back here next year, we should bring specific commitments to promote transparency; to fight corruption; to energize civic engagement; to leverage new technologies so that we strengthen the foundations of freedom in our own countries... It’s time for every member state to open its elections to international monitors and increase the UN Democracy Fund.28

The democracy–development nexus was further fleshed out with the release of the State Department’s first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) in December 2010.29 It argues that American diplomacy and development policy must further national security through the concept of human security. Therefore democracy and governance are listed as one of six areas of focus for development policy (alongside sustainable economic growth, food security, global health, climate change and humanitarian assistance). The greater integration of democracy in development and human security goals is reflected, according to the QDDR, in the proposal to reorganize the office of the under secretary for democracy and global affairs under the new designation of civilian security, democracy, and human rights. Yet from a purely DP perspective this can also be seen as a potential dilution with democracy becoming grouped with a growing number of issues given equal status. Under the QDDR proposal, the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor would from one of four under the present under secretary to one of five or more. For those who would have liked the creation of an under secretary for democracy and human rights, for example, this is a step back. Similarly, while the QDDR reaffirms the importance of democracy to USAID’s mission, it does not propose elevating it by giving it its own dedicated bureau, leaving it in the Bureau of Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance. These proposals leave scope for concern that, with the greater integration of democracy with other issues such as conflict, humanitarian assistance or global health, US agencies will prioritise the latter as they are likelier to generate urgent crises. These would divert attention and resources from the longer-term needs of democracy promotion.

Ultimately, it does not appear to be the case that democratisation is relegated or subsumed within development but rather that the administration sees little to separate the two. It appears to have – so far – equally a developmental view of democracy and a democratised view of development. While the administration seems to have a genuine belief in this approach, it is one that is also diplomatically and politically useful as a further differentiation from the Bush rhetoric and agenda. Yet the emphasis on the democracy–development nexus allows for the presentation of a new strategic framework for American DP mostly by contrast with the preceding administration’s approach. With a wider frame of reference, it is more a ‘new-old’ framework than a truly innovative one, reflecting the enduring pull of a well-known ‘all good things go together’ mindset on US foreign policy, development aid and DP.30 As Thomas Carothers points out, furthermore, the United States has long had both a strategic political agenda for its development aid and a developmental dimension to its DP, especially through the role of USAID as the largest funder of American DP, even though the political dimension has had a much higher
What is more, the DP and development communities have been for some time groping towards what Carothers describes as ‘the elusive synthesis’ between their respective fields. 

Barack Obama’s NSS and his September 2010 UN speeches show that his administration does not see a strategy of engagement as a realpolitik swing away from any form of democracy promotion. Rather engagement reflects the belief that DP does not gain by America being only antagonistic towards autocratic regimes, especially the more powerful ones with which the United States has limited leverage. Thus, the administration’s ambition in its relations with less democratic countries is to pursue a variety of goals in a mutually reinforcing way, or at the very least in parallel. In that respect, it is interesting to note the chapter by Michael McFaul in a 2009 volume on democracy in US security strategy, written before he joined the administration, which reads very much like a blueprint for the sort of ‘dual-track’ engagement that the Obama administration claims to have pursued so far. In it, McFaul calls for ‘a more sophisticated strategy of engaging our autocratic friends that allows the United States to pursue its material and strategic interests in the short term while simultaneously doing more to encourage evolutionary change in these kinds of regimes.’ The question remains, however, as to whether such a strategy can actually deliver on Washington’s different security, developmental and democracy goals at the same time, as the NSS assumes, for example in relations with Russia, China, Iran or Sudan. Judging the aptness and fruitfulness of a grand strategy is a long-term enterprise beyond the scope of this article. All that can be done at this stage is to see how the Obama administration in its first two years has begun to put in place the policies that will serve its strategy of engagement as far as democracy and human rights are concerned.

Obama’s democracy promotion at the policy level

The politics of congressional approval for presidential appointments meant that many senior or mid-level administration positions were not filled for several months after Barack Obama took office. This would have slowed down any efforts to develop new policies, programmes or initiatives, especially so given that the president and his foreign policy principals had their time consumed by more urgent issues such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Nevertheless, one obvious place to start evaluating the administration’s commitment to democracy promotion at the policy level is through its budget requests to Congress. An overview of Obama’s first two budgets shows that overall funding requests for DP have increased from the levels of the Bush administration. This is noteworthy given the state of the American economy and the government’s massive fiscal deficit. Contrary to the impression given by his critics, Obama has not sought to cut DP spending as a whole. While it is possible to criticize specific cuts in funding requests for democracy programmes, these have tended to be balanced by increases elsewhere, reflecting shifts in sectoral priorities from the Bush administration.

The budget request contains five categories, including ‘Governing Justly and Democratically (GJD), which covers most US government spending on democracy promotion. Table 1 shows the GJD budget breakdown in the latest three fiscal years, as analysed by Freedom House. Comparing Obama’s first full budget request made in 2009 for Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 with Bush’s last budget request, Table 1 shows that Obama’s FY2010 GJD request represented a $1.1 billion increase from actual spending in Bush’s last budget. There were higher requests in each of the GJD sub-sectors too. Spending estimates for FY2010, however, show that Congress will have appropriated sums just below actual spending in the previous year, except for the civil society sub-sector.
Barack Obama also submitted higher FY2010 requests for USAID’s Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs ($76 to $86 million), the UN Democracy Fund ($3 to $14 million) and the National Endowment for Democracy ($80 to $100 million). He also requested the same level of funding ($87 million) as Bush did for the Middle East Partnership Initiative. There was, however, a cut in the request for the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (down to $70 million).

In the context of a first-year administration with a full agenda and slow to fill many positions, one reason for the FY2010 budget requests to maintain or increase democracy promotion spending might be a degree of bureaucratic inertia in which Bush-era programmes were rolled over to the following year. The second Obama budget indicates that this was not necessarily the case, however. Stephen McInerney writes: ‘[I]t is in reality the first request compiled entirely by his administration. … one remarkable feature of the FY2011 budget is the surprising level of continuity from FY2010. Key programs that were temporarily held over one year ago have now received longer-term support, while changes made in FY2010 have now been consolidated in the FY2011 budget.’

The FY2011 GJD request was a record $3.3 billion. To keep things in perspective, however, one should not forget that this amount is the ‘democracy share’ of an international affairs budget request that stands at $58.5 billion, of which $41.3 billion goes under foreign assistance. There are variations to note at the sub-sector level with increased requests for ‘Rule of Law and Human Rights’ and ‘Good Governance’, but decreases for ‘Political Competition and Consensus-Building’ and ‘Civil Society’. One important proviso about the second Obama budget is that the increase in the GJD request is entirely due to a $587 million rise for Afghanistan. That country accounts for 42 per cent of the FY2011 request (compared to 35 per cent for the previous year). Thus, if Afghanistan is removed from the calculation there is in fact a very slight decrease in the GJD request from the previous year. Freedom House highlights that, in addition to Afghanistan, there has been a greater concentration of funds on Pakistan and a small group of post-conflict/fragile states (Iraq, Liberia, Sudan and West Bank/Gaza). Together these countries account for 60 per cent of the total GJD request for FY2011.

How far do the Obama administration’s budgets reflect the attempt to develop a new framework for DP, especially with regards to the development–democracy nexus, and also the role of civil society in it? Development specialists have broadly welcome the administration’s funding efforts in foreign assistance, noting that Obama has made progress towards fulfilling his campaign promise to double aid. For example, the FY2011 funding request for the USAID was $1.76 billion, compared to actual spending of $1.26 billion in FY2009. There also appears to be a funding (as well as rhetorical) commitment to the

<p>| Table 1. Democracy-related spending within the State Department and Foreign Operations budget. |
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<th>FY2009 Request</th>
<th>FY2009 Actual</th>
<th>FY2010 Request</th>
<th>FY2010 Estimate</th>
<th>FY2011 Request</th>
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<td>Governing Justly and Democratically (GJD)</td>
<td>1.72bn</td>
<td>2.70bn</td>
<td>2.81bn</td>
<td>2.66bn</td>
<td>3.33bn</td>
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<td>Of which:</td>
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<td>Rule of Law and Human Rights</td>
<td>475m</td>
<td>699m</td>
<td>754m</td>
<td>737m</td>
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<td>Good Governance</td>
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<td>1.07bn</td>
<td>979m</td>
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Source: Freedom House.
Millennium Challenge Corporation with a FY2011 request of $1.28 billion compared to actual spending of $875 million in FY2009. As Table 1 shows, the administration has asked for large increases in the ‘Good Governance’ sub-sector of the GJD funding request, but, again, this is entirely accounted for by Afghanistan, which represents 62 per cent of the ‘Good Governance’ request itself. Meanwhile, some decisions appear to contradict the administration’s rhetoric about the importance of engaging and supporting civil society abroad. The GJD ‘Civil Society’ FY2011 request is down by 10 per cent from that of the previous year, including in key countries like Afghanistan (−27 per cent) and Iraq (−43 per cent). This is compensated to a degree by increases to Sudan (+31 per cent) and Cuba (+20 per cent). Furthermore, the civil society share of the GJD request dropped from 24 to 17 per cent. The announcement by Secretary Clinton at the meeting of the Community of Democracies in Poland, in July 2010, that the US contribution to a newly announced global civil society initiative would be $2 million looks an underwhelming financial commitment to back up her strong rhetoric about the crucial role of civil society in enabling democratization. Some have warned that the developmental focus of the administration’s DP, especially when it comes to strengthening state capacity and promoting ‘country ownership’ of programmes, risks empowering autocratic governments and weakening independent civil society. This has been especially worrying where US assistance to civil society has been restricted to state-registered and effectively government-approved groups, as in Egypt and Russia.42

Funding decisions are only one item on the democracy promotion agenda for any American administration. Equally important is how the United States reacts to the democratization breakthroughs, setbacks and crises that are part of ebb and flow of international events. Some in the DP community who have praised President Obama for his general rhetoric on democracy and human rights, and who have welcomed his funding of democracy programmes, have still voiced criticism as to how this has not been consistently followed up with clear diplomatic action towards the likes of Russia, China or Egypt:43

The administration criticized the narrowing of freedom in Russia, but cooperation on Iran was a higher priority. It chided Hosni Mubarak for choking civil society in Egypt, but the autocrat’s cooperation on Israel–Palestine mattered more.44

The muted American reaction to the deeply flawed parliamentary elections in Egypt in November 2010 will have confirmed this opinion.45 In this regard, the Obama administration has been generally inconsistent and often appeared timid. With a strategy of engagement, the administration may have imposed upon itself certain limits in what it can say about regimes with poor democracy records. But does this necessarily mean that Washington cannot go beyond a general or abstract rhetorical commitment to universal values to take a clearer public position on specific abuses and criticize the perpetrators? When it has failed to do so, the Obama administration has only reinforced the impression that it has a realist reluctance to turn democracy rhetoric into deeds. The strategy of engagement must be able to accommodate clear and public denunciation of coups, fraudulent elections and political abuses alongside the pursuit of greater strategic goals if it is to mean more than standard realism, as its authors insist it does.

In two democratization crises confronting it during its first year – Iran’s presidential election and the removal from office of the president of Honduras – the Obama administration found out in starkly contrasting strategic contexts the difficulty of accommodating the two elements of engagement simultaneously. In the strategically important case of Iran, the United States reacted with extreme caution and even hesitation to the claims of
electoral fraud in the June 2009 presidential poll and to the ensuing repression of the regime’s opponents. Washington showed considerable reluctance to acknowledge the democratic cause of the Iranian opposition out of unwillingness to undermine efforts at diplomatic engagement with the Tehran regime over its nuclear activities. Yet, those wishing that Obama had been much more forthright in its criticism of Iran’s fraudulent election must acknowledge that his stance also reflected the fundamental fact that Washington effectively has no leverage on events in Iran and little obvious way of helping democratisation actors there. In this context, the downplaying of democracy can perhaps be justified on the ground of pragmatism since the United States had a weak hand to play in Iran’s politics, and a more important and urgent issue at stake in trying to prevent the further buildup of the country’s nuclear programme. Honduras offered a completely different strategic context for the Obama administration to put its democracy promotion into practice – a small country in the United States’ traditional sphere of influence and where there is no particular countervailing US strategic interest against democracy concerns. The US reaction to the ousting of the democratically elected president by the army in June 2009, and to the months of constitutional crisis and political wrangling that followed, was initially one of strong condemnation. Yet the American efforts to engineer a clearly democratic solution to the political situation in Honduras became diluted over time because of a combination of domestic and regional factors. While the administration did try to follow a DP line in Honduras, it also undermined it by eventually opting for a policy that led to a settlement that was less democratic than its earlier position had suggested. By contrast with Iran, the Honduran case shows that, even in a country where it has greater leverage and where there is no other real strategic interest at stake, it still proved difficult for the Obama administration to adopt a clear and consistent democratisation policy.

Perhaps the greatest criticism of the Obama administration and its strategy of engagement from a democracy promotion perspective should be reserved for its policy towards Afghanistan. Clearly the country is of great strategic importance to the United States and political importance to the Obama White House. With the level of its military and financial commitment to propping the Afghan state and President Hamid Karzai’s government, the United States should have at least some leverage over the country’s politics. In all the debates over the war in Afghanistan, Barack Obama has not framed the issue in exclusively military and security terms. He has long, and consistently, endorsed the view that there has to be a political solution in Afghanistan inasmuch as the United States must deliver legitimate and functioning governance institutions if it is to successfully wind down its military involvement there. Yet as the scale of fraud in the presidential election of 20 August 2009 became apparent, neither Obama nor any senior administration figure issued a strong public condemnation. In the aftermath of a universally derided electoral fiasco, there was an evident unwillingness to acknowledge publicly that the actions of Karzai represented a major setback for democratisation in Afghanistan. In the months after the election, the United States was reported to be trying to pressure Karzai in private over accommodation with his political opponents and over growing worries about corruption within the Afghan government. But American efforts to engage with Karzai and those in power in Afghanistan while abstaining from serious public criticism do not seem to have borne fruit. Diplomatic cables released by the WikiLeaks website reveal the extent of US concerns about corruption, the influence of drug traffickers and the behaviour of Karzai himself.

Throughout 2010, the Obama administration grappled with the glaring issue of corruption in Afghanistan, and found itself unable to stick to a clear line towards alleged perpetrators, in spite of its good-governance rhetoric. The American president
and others tried to take a stronger stance, public and private, towards President Karzai on corruption, including during Obama’s trip to Afghanistan in March 2010. This has not produced much by way of results with, among other things, the failure to pass an anti-corruption decree, high-level aides and associates of Karzai being implicated in investigations, the firing of a senior prosecutor who alleged pressure to block such investigations, the scandal surrounding Kabul Bank, and US federal prosecutors opening a criminal investigation of one of the president’s brothers. The anti-corruption pressure from Washington does not appear to be changing conditions in Afghanistan to any noticeable extent; instead it has caused foreign policy difficulties. Days after Obama pressed Karzai on the issue during his Afghan trip, the latter gave a fiery speech attacking the Western powers whose support has kept him in power. By and large, the US anti-corruption effort has also been balanced within the administration by concerns that public criticism of Karzai and other senior figures alienates him and destabilizes the Afghan government, undermining public trust in the authorities and strengthening the Taliban. Because of this dilemma, there was in late 2010 a toning down again of the criticism towards President Karzai in an apparent attempt to get him to commit more fully to the anti-corruption efforts.

Just as there does not appear to have been a great deal of progress for the United States on good governance in Afghanistan, the parliamentary elections of September 2010 also did not mark any progress from the 2009 presidential poll in terms of transparency and fairness. Against US wishes, President Karzai through new appointment powers had already taken control of the Electoral Complaints Commission, which had played a key role in highlighting fraud in 2009. For the parliamentary elections, turnout was the lowest since the US invasion, and independent domestic and international observers warned that the level of electoral fraud might even have exceeded that of the previous year.48

For the Obama administration, Afghanistan could end up serving as a striking example of the difficulty of turning a democracy promotion framework and an apparently coherent strategy based on it into consistent and effective policies. It shows the enduring limits and difficulties of leveraging American power into influence on democratization abroad. In Afghanistan, the realist dimension of its strategy of engagement dictates the limits of its democracy and human rights dimension. This in itself is neither new nor surprising. What matters for Barack Obama, if his democracy promotion is to be more than mostly rhetorical and if the strategy of engagement is to mean more than realism leavened where possible with values, is that his administration finds ways of pushing out the limit of the democracy dimension and making engagement as principled as it can be.

**Conclusion**

This article has argued that, contrary to what the critics have claimed, President Barack Obama and his administration do not reject the democracy tradition in US foreign policy. There has been a stark and deliberate rhetorical break from the Bush era, but the president and many of his foreign policy appointees are basically liberal internationalists with a conventional view of democracy promotion. Especially in 2010, there has been a clear and consistent effort by the administration to craft a rhetoric and framework that reflect its take on the democracy tradition. It has put forward an argument that presents the promotion of development, democracy and human rights in one indivisible package, in effect playing its own variation on the well-known ‘all good things go together’ theme that has been at the heart of American DP historically.
The strategy of engagement, which best defines the Obama foreign policy so far, does not argue that democracy and human rights do not matter. Rather it admits the historically obvious fact that they cannot be pursued to the exclusion of other – often more pressing – US goals. It might be said that Obama’s strategy of engagement has incorporated the old criticism that American DP is affected or undermined by being one of competing US goals; it effectively acknowledges this without going on to discarding DP altogether. Perhaps what has surprised – and given the impression that democracy is being downgraded – is the relative bluntness with which the president and members of his administration have said so publicly sometimes, as with Obama in relation to Russia and Clinton in relation to China. Where Obama is a realist (or where he is realistic) is when it comes to the prospects for the United States to influence democratisation abroad and the realization that democratisation, however desirable, can clash with other US strategic goals.

A realistic view of what American DP can achieve, and of its limitations and contradictions, are welcome, as is a broader, more developmental conception of democratisation, but they will not in themselves eliminate the tensions that are inherent in democracy promotion. This has already been reflected in the difficulties the Obama administration has faced so far in implementing its DP approach at the policy level, e.g. in Iran, Honduras and Afghanistan. There is no reason to expect that this task will become easier. Things are also likely to become more complicated with Obama facing a Republican House of Representatives with its power over US government spending – not that this need spell doom for the administration’s DP efforts, as the example of the Clinton presidency from 1995 shows. Perhaps instead the real challenge to American democracy promotion under Barack Obama will come from more fundamental issues about its relation to US power in the international system. If the rise of China and the emergence of stronger regional powers lead to a relative decline of US power in the world, there will be structural reasons for the evolving shape of American DP to come. The same goes for the state of the fiscal health of the US government in the next decade or more. The decline from the peak of the DP consensus in the 1990s and the backlash against it, the countervailing power of autocracies like China and Russia, and even a putative autocracy promotion are all to be seen in this context. In a scenario of fading American hegemony, the defining question will not be whether Barack Obama (or a successor, for that matter) believes in DP or not but whether the United States will have a diminished leverage towards and access to other countries in its attempts to promote its political values around a multi-polar world.

Postscript: the Obama administration and the political crisis in Egypt

This article was completed in December 2010, days before the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in the town of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia set in motion a chain of events that led to the collapse of Tunisia’s autocratic regime and political shockwaves spreading throughout the Arab world. With protests against Hosni Mubarak beginning five days into the second half of Barack Obama’s term, Egypt has been the first true crisis-management test of his administration’s approach to democracy promotion. This showed again that events – and the need to respond to them ‘in real time’ – have a habit of overtaking discussions of strategy and long-term thinking when it comes to the mix of democratization and foreign policy. A considered judgment of Washington’s handling of the crisis must wait for a time when enough hindsight is possible, so this postscript limits itself to highlighting what Egypt’s putative revolution has thrown up for the Obama administration in the context of the arguments made in the article above.
The article asks whether a strategy of engagement can accommodate consistently DP in the formulation of foreign policy on a case-by-case basis, and whether it can deliver on Washington’s different goals at the same time? Not for the first time in its history, the United States (like most other countries, it should be said) was caught unawares by the sudden explosion of popular anger at an autocratic regime that had looked secure even days earlier, as Egypt’s government had seemed, having just sailed through widely condemned parliamentary elections. The DP dimension of engagement is premised on the belief that democratisation abroad prevents anarchy and chaos. Events in Egypt have made clear, unsurprisingly, that democratization surges can just as well create a situation that Washington will see as dangerously anarchic and chaotic, thus driving policy-makers nearer the point where they have to make uncomfortable choices. The administration’s extremely cautious and reactive daily moves can be seen as an attempt to keep squaring the equation, somehow or other, without being completely left behind by events. Hence the United States worked behind-the-scenes toward the ‘orderly transition’ that Washington settled on as its optimal outcome once it became clear that a fatal blow had been dealt to the Mubarak regime. In that sense, the Obama administration has sought to apply engagement thinking pragmatically to steer Egypt policy, rather than acting purely ad hoc. Time will tell whether efforts to use whatever channels Washington has to the Egyptian regime has succeeded in nudging it into a reform process comprehensive enough that it would satisfy the Egyptian people but also proceed at a pace moderate enough that it would not hurt other parts of US foreign policy. The occasional signs of frustration with the response from the rulers in Cairo, as in Afghanistan, display that America’s leverage in the domestic politics of even its biggest allies and clients more limited than might appear, especially over zero-sum power calculations between rulers and ruled.

While the United States has engaged the Egyptian regime, it is much less clear that Egypt is also a satisfactory case of engagement with civil society as per the dual-track claims. As noted above, the Obama administration acquiesced to the curtailing of US support to civil society in Egypt. Other than at some incidental level, it is hard to argue that 2009–10 saw much of a US strategy to engage with or build up Egyptian civil society. Egypt shows that the Obama administration will have to come through with more consistency on its rhetoric of engaging civil society abroad. Had that already been the case, it would have had more channels to the Egyptian protesters and opposition, which might have made America’s engagement during the crisis more effective in steering all parties involved toward its preferred political outcome. The nature of the protests in Cairo perhaps also shows that there has been a failure (over the years, not just since 2009) to help build strong, independent civil society institutions that would offer more capable actors to partner in an ‘orderly transition’ process. Furthermore, if engagement is in part about promoting democracy so as to build up effective and reliable international partners for the United States, Egypt could end up showing that failing to engage enough with civil society and opposition forces over time leads to any eventual new leaders not wishing to be as strong a partner to the United States as the autocratic regime that has been displaced.

On a final, more positive note relating to engagement with civil society, enthusiasm about the potential of information and communication technologies to help democratization actors has been a recurring theme in the Obama administration’s rhetoric, as mentioned in the discussion of its National Security Strategy above. To a certain extent, this has seemed a vogue-ish and slightly utopian technophilia, especially in the wake of Iran’s unsuccessful Green Movement. It could also be criticised as an attempt to bypass having to make hard diplomatic and political choices about on-the-ground actions for supporting
democracy abroad. But in light of recent events in Egypt and the Arab world, and the role played in them by new media and social networking platforms, support for information and Internet freedom and the spread of communication technologies could prove a promising approach to exploiting new avenues in democracy assistance.

Notes
3. Hillary Rodham Clinton, ‘Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Nomination Hearing to Be Secretary of State’ (Washington, DC: Department of State, 13 January 2009).
10. Barack Obama, ‘Remarks by the President on a New Beginning’ (Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt, 4 June 2009).
20. Ibid., 1.
21. Ibid., 15.
22. Ibid., 26.
23. Ibid., 37-40.
24. Ibid., 37-38.
40. McInerney, Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2011.
42. Jennifer L. Windsor, ‘Testimony before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs hearing on Human Rights and Democracy Assistance: Increasing the Effectiveness of US Foreign Aid’ (Washington, DC, 10 June 2010).
44. Fred Hiatt, ‘Will Obama’s Foreign Policy Follow his new Democracy Rhetoric?’, The Washington Post, 4 October 2010.

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