Force and democracy

Robert Cooper*

Democracy needs a favourable environment: force can help provide external security, but democracy also needs strong international institutions and agreement on the rules of the game at home.

No matter how favourable the external environment, democracy will not take root unless some basic compromises can be reached between different groups, classes and ethnicities that establish the rules of the game. The losers in elections must believe in the constitution sufficiently to accept defeat – in the confidence that they will get another chance later on to contest elections. The winners must be sufficiently committed to the constitution not to abuse it and use their power to oppress or disadvantage the opposition. In achieving a settlement of these fundamental questions, outsiders cannot play much of a role.

Some of the enemies of democracy – dictators and their military backing – can be defeated by armies. But not all. Sometimes the real enemy is traditional society in its different forms; sometimes it is a modern oligarchy bringing together politics, especially nationalist or ethnic politics, and economic interest. The spread of ideas and the spread of the market are the most important means to defeat these (which is why modern oligarchs seek to control both). Assisting those who are seeking fairer courts, freer media, genuine elections, better protection for human rights and better commercial law may not produce instant success. But it must be worth trying. Scholarships, libraries and other ways of spreading ideas may also have a part to play in the Middle East, as they did in Korea. They may be slow, pedestrian, uncertain – but no more uncertain than the use of force. In the long run, democracy succeeds because of its success. Its product is the Mercedes Benz rather than the Trabant, education and cultural exchange rather than isolation and starvation. People want democracy because they want a better life; consumerism is not beautiful, but it too is an image of liberty.

Every country is different, and there are as many routes to democracy as there are countries. India took to it naturally; Pakistan has struggled. Indonesia looks increasingly like a success story, against all expectations. Thailand, Chile, Taiwan, South Africa and Spain all have different stories. In many cases the position of the army has been a vital factor. It may be that foreign forces will succeed in bringing democracy to Iraq. It is always a mistake to underestimate either America’s will or its capacity for getting things done, and the enthusiasm of most Iraqis for elections is clear. But the choice will in the end be the Iraqis’, and there is no way even the most powerful of foreign powers can guarantee the outcome. We all hope for success, but in historical terms it would be a rare case, and it would be unwise to build too much on it. Indeed, we should be careful about using the threat of force to press for democratic change: nothing is more likely to strengthen the tyrant and legitimise the illegitimate than a foreign threat. No communist regime collapsed as a result of outside pressure; internal change comes easier when people feel more secure externally.

It is not a question of abandoning the Wilsonian vision of encouraging the spread of democracy so much as being realistic about what an outside actor can achieve. Foreigners, especially foreign armies, are not equipped to broker domestic constitutional settlements, but they can create a positive external security environment in which such a settlement will have more chance of prospering. The inability to create an adequate security environment in the 1920s and 1930s was a major reason for the failure of the original Wilsonian package. At that time the failures included the incomplete defeat of Germany, the defects in the Versailles Treaty, the absence of the United States and Soviet Russia.
from the League of Nations, the League’s somewhat cloudy ideas, and the failure to put muscle behind those ideas.

But the basic Wilsonian package was not wrong. Self-determination, democracy and the institutionalization of international security go well together. Self-determination is a precondition for democracy; unless there is a sufficient sense of community, democracy on the basis of majority voting will not work. Democracy in turn contributes to peace. The idea that the peace will be kept by ‘the force of international public opinion’ – on which ultimately the hopes for the League rested – makes sense only if public opinion has a chance to make itself heard. But democracy itself is most likely to prosper in an international environment that creates trust between states.

“Trust between states,” the classical realist may scoff, “is impossible.” One of the (many) weaknesses of Wilson’s rhetoric is that he seemed to base his plans on the idea of a natural harmony of interests among nations. Nothing of the sort exists. Nor, however, is there any natural harmony of interests among men. The triumph of the rule of law is that it manages these natural conflicts. It is the legal framework that enables markets to channel greed into constructive economic activity. In the end, men discover that for all their natural conflicts, they have a common interest in upholding the law. But markets are not natural; they are the outcome of man-made laws.

Nor is democracy the natural condition of mankind. It is simply that experience has taught us that nothing else makes the rule of law sustainable. The compromises necessary to make constitutions work are the price we pay to channel ambition into constructive political activity. Institutions exist to create trust, that indispensable element in human society. The rule of law creates the trust that enables markets to function. Democracy is a way of compensating for the fact that no one is to be trusted with too much power for too long.

International institutions are needed for the same reasons: to provide continuity and predictability – the next best thing to trust – in an uncertain world. They are needed precisely because states, like men, are not to be trusted. It would be logical for those who press the case for domestic institutions – democracy and the market economy – to want institutions at the international level too. We are now in a democratic era. This may be seen not just in the growing number of democracies – many of them rather shaky – but also in the homage paid to the idea of democracy by those like Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, who fix elections to give themselves a pretence of democratic legitimacy, or by authoritarian countries like the DPRK who nonetheless find it essential to include the ‘D for Democratic’ in their names. The idea is acknowledged even when the reality is denied.

This has consequences for the international system. The realist world of rational policymaking, equilibrium, alliances of convenience and the balance of power worked best when we were governed by rational oligarchs – Richelieu, Pitt, Palmerston or Bismarck. Democratic ideas mean that policy requires a moral basis. The idea of the dignity of man will not go away, and policies have to be based on ideals and human sympathy as well as on interest. In a democratic world, the use of force becomes more difficult to handle. Wars need greater moral legitimacy than in an autocratic age. To sell them, a Roosevelt or a Reagan is needed. And once started they are more difficult to end. Every war risks becoming a crusade. This was not a problem in the cases of World War II and the Cold War – in both, unconditional surrender was the only acceptable outcome – but it does not suit the conduct of lesser campaigns. Democracy made it difficult for America either to prosecute the Vietnam War with as much ruthlessness as North Vietnam did, or to cut its losses and get out.

The balance of power, which calls for the application of power with calculation and restraint, is no longer sustainable in a democratic age. Nor is the exercise of hegemony by force – which has been the other source of stability in...
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The international system. For a democracy, domination by the ruthless use of force ceases to be an option in the international field just as it has in the domestic – as Gandhi well understood when he began the process of dismantling the British Empire.

Neither equilibrium nor domination works well in a democratic age. And if democracies are inherently less bellicose, then basing the international order on a system logically dependent on wars and force is intellectually incoherent and practically mistaken. Nothing is left but to manage international relations through institutions, as Woodrow Wilson foresaw. Those we have at the moment function poorly, which is hardly a surprise, given how short their history is. Even the most competent, such as NATO and the EU, come nowhere near matching the national governments that make them up in either efficiency or legitimacy (the two frequently go together). We have learned something from past failures, but there is much further to go.

Force remains indispensable in international affairs, both because we have not yet achieved the democratic dream and because even if we do, it will still be needed as the ultimate enforcer of law. In the meanwhile we need force to protect ourselves and help create a favourable environment for democracy. But as the world becomes more democratic, and so more civilised, force will be less visible and less prominent in international relations.

We have chosen to be good rather than to be powerful. Torture is unacceptable, not just because it is ineffective, but because our system is based on respect for individual people. Europeans talk of human rights and the rule of law while Americans talk of freedom and democracy, but they mean the same thing. For America, the way to be good in a world of power used to be to isolate itself. That is no longer possible. Instead it seeks to remake the world in its own image. This is the European project also, though on a more modest, regional basis. We are all Wilsonians now. And we should understand that the true Wilsonian institutions are not bodies like the UN, but rather NATO and the EU, embodying the values of democracy and law.

It would be nice to remake the world. But some things are beyond the control even of America. Democracy is one of them. Democracy means rule by the people, and no one else can make their choices for them. The spread of the idea and the spread of the practice are nevertheless impressive. There are many ways we can assist short of employing force – using military power to provide security is one of them – but in the end it is the force of the idea and the power of its practice that conquers.

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*Robert Cooper works for Javier Solana at the Council of the European Union. The views expressed are his own.

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