

The Varied—and Global—Threat Confronting Democracy

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November 21, 2017

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Just over a year has passed since Election Day 2016, and a special counsel plus three congressional committees continue to struggle to figure out [whether Russia colluded with the Trump campaign](#) to help tip that election.

That is a hugely important question, of course. But the danger in focusing on it too much is that the country could lose sight of a broader and more pernicious reality: Whatever Russia did last year amounted to an attack on American democracy. Worse, that is only one of several ways the democratic model is under threat.

William Burns, a career foreign service officer who served as both ambassador to Russia and deputy secretary of state, sees “a conflict of ideas and models” playing out on the world stage. Both Russia and China are holding up what Mr. Burns calls their “authoritarian managed economic models” as alternatives to democracy.

Moreover, to the extent that the U.S. itself sometimes seems not to take its own democratic ideals seriously, or fails to make them work well, it can actually help erode the appeal of a system that has long served as an international beacon of hope.

In short, the democratic model is under threat on three fronts. Let’s look at them in turn:

China: President Xi Jinping used a recent [Communist Party Congress to cement his own power](#), reduce the potential for internal challenges from other figures and establish a kind of cult of personality built around a constitutionally blessed school of “Xi Jinping Thought.”

That all thwarted democratic impulses and cemented Mr. Xi’s personal control, while solidifying his vision of an economy built on big and strong state-owned enterprises. He also declared that he intends for the resulting economic strength to make China a “great power” at the center of international affairs.

Implicitly, at least, Mr. Xi also is creating an authoritarian model for others to follow. “What’s interesting to me, at least, is the extent to which Xi, in ways I can’t remember in the last 40 years or so, is holding up the Chinese model as an example,” says Mr. Burns. That has particular importance in Asia, where other nations watch China closely.

Russia: President Vladimir Putin is busy dismantling notions of real democracy in Russia. He’s widely expected to seek and win a fourth six-year term as president next year, and he served as prime minister during the only four years since 2000 he hasn’t been president.

Moreover, he has created a new National Guard, headed by his former chief bodyguard, to protect the country’s leaders from unspecified threats, and has just proposed increasing its power. That sounds like a kind of modern-day Praetorian Guard.

At the same time he is thwarting democratic trends at home, Mr. Putin seems determined to discredit the Western democratic model on the world stage. His intelligence services appear to have meddled in elections in, among others, France, Britain and Montenegro, and engaged in campaigns to sow discord in political systems elsewhere.

Clint Watts, a former Federal Bureau of Investigation counterterrorism expert now at George Washington University, says Russia began inserting itself into the American presidential campaign in the summer of 2015, with an apparent goal of weakening Democrat Hillary Clinton, then the odds-on favorite to be the next American president.

Only later, it appears, did the Russians decide that Donald Trump was the candidate they wanted to help win, he says. Throughout, though, the Kremlin had a broader goal: weaken the image of the U.S. by using [covert social-media campaigns](#) to stoke social and cultural divisions and make democracy look messy and unstable.

The U.S.: His critics charge that Mr. Trump exhibits some authoritarian tendencies of his own, and his occasional disparaging remarks about “rigged” democratic institutions seem to suggest that. The fact is, though, that the American system of checks and balances—a hallmark of the democratic model—remains strong and vibrant.

Yet there are reasons to worry about the health of the American model. Current leaders seem unable to find their way to consensus or even compromise on the biggest issues of the day, which can breed voter despair and disillusionment.

Demographic trends also are straining the American model. Because of the way the Electoral College works, two of the past three presidents first won office while losing the popular vote. And David Birdsell, dean of the school of public and international affairs at Baruch College, notes that by 2040, about 70% of Americans are expected to live in the 15 largest states. They will have only 30 senators representing them, while the remaining 30% of Americans will have 70 senators representing them.

That's the way the system works, of course. But there will be growing need for enlightened leaders who can show it actually does work for all.