

Diminishing Global Freedom: A Growing National Security Problem

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Two important reports were published earlier this year, neither of which received the attention it deserved. The U.S. Intelligence Community issued its Annual Threat Assessment, and Freedom House (a non-profit, non-partisan organization focused on supporting democracy), released its Freedom in the World 2024 report. The Annual Threat Assessment details the greatest threats confronting the United States, whereas the Freedom in the World report assesses the political rights and civil liberties afforded people living in 195 countries and 15 territories. (The Freedom in the World report also rates each country and territory as being either 'free,' 'partly free,' or 'not free.') While at first glance these reports might appear to have nothing

in common, they are intimately related and paint a dire picture of the world.

The Annual Threat Assessment's opening sentence succinctly describes the state of the world and what it means for the United States: “[d]uring the next year, the United States faces an increasingly fragile global order strained by accelerating strategic competition among major powers, more intense and unpredictable transnational challenges, and multiple regional conflicts with far-reaching implications.” In other words, the world is becoming more complex and dangerous, and as a result the United States is facing a host of threats.

But what is driving the increasingly perilous global threat environment? A variety of explanations have been posited – from extreme geopolitical competition, to economic decoupling, to the United States' inability to enforce global rules and norms. While these and other related explanations have merit, the root cause of the vast majority of the world's biggest security problems is aptly accounted for in the Freedom in the World report.

According to that report, ***“global freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year in 2023”*** [emphasis added]. Of the 210 countries and territories studied by Freedom House:

- Nearly 25% of countries suffered declines in freedom last year; freedom levels improved in only 10% of the examined countries.

- Only 40% of countries were rated as ‘free.’ The remaining 60% of countries and territories were ‘partly free’ or ‘not free.’
- Only 20% of the world’s people live in countries considered ‘free,’ compared to 42% (‘partly free’) and 38% (‘not free’).

Why should we care that an increasing number of countries are becoming less free? In general, ‘not free’ countries are led by authoritarian governments, consisting of a group of elites who are not accountable to their country’s citizenry. For example, China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, the four greatest adversaries of the United States and all of which feature prominently in the Annual Threat Assessment, were rated as ‘not free’ by Freedom House. Authoritarian governments do not permit a free press or criticism of their actions. They also do not respect human or individual rights, and they do not practice the rule of law as we know it. Instead, authoritarians rule *by* law – meaning that rather than their power being bound by law, the law is subservient to their agenda.

The primary (and unstated) objective of authoritarian governments is to maintain control - do whatever it takes (to include lying, cheating, and stealing), to control the populace and stay in power. Such governments obscure the truth, leading to a lack of transparency and, among other things, unpredictability. When faced with uncertainty, households and businesses often delay spending and investment, limiting innovation and economic growth.

Lack of transparency also allows the leaders of authoritarian governments to enrich themselves by any means necessary, which breeds corruption. The citizenry learns to trust less and implicitly understands that the surest way to get ahead is to bribe government officials in hopes of currying favor. In addition, believing that their governments do not care about their interests, some individuals look for any way to extract value for themselves – rules be damned. This results in more corruption, extreme and often unfair business practices (e.g., fraud, theft, etc.), and more societal instability and chaos, (if only beneath the surface). Of course, criminal organizations thrive and expand in corrupt environments, and terrorist groups flourish in unstable ones.

Ironically, as authoritarian leaders accumulate power and wealth, they thirst for even more. They also come to feel more exposed, likely a byproduct of their isolated existence, as well as an understanding that were they to lose power the system could be used against them. As cases in point, the constitutions in Russia and China were amended so that Presidents Putin and Xi could remain in power perpetually. Yet, despite the increased “security” of Putin’s and Xi’s positions, Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022. Similarly, China has made it abundantly clear that it will reunify with Taiwan, and it has pressed spurious territorial claims over both the South and East China Seas.

Due in part to today’s extensive global interconnectivity, the impact of turmoil caused by

authoritarian regimes (like those resulting from extraterritorial land grabs), have ramifications far outside of the immediate geographic area in which the initial activities occur. Indeed, in the United States we often feel the impacts via increased numbers of people seeking to immigrate and higher prices for capital and consumer goods.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had a dramatic effect on the number of people fleeing both countries and on the price of certain commodities (like oil, gas, and wheat). Iran-sponsored Houthi rebels in Yemen continue to attack commercial ships in the Red Sea (likely at Iran's direction), leading to increased transportation costs and thus higher prices for products dependent upon global trade. Our economy, like most other countries', is heavily dependent on the ability to buy and sell materials and goods around the world, and without secure supply chains and free and open markets, we suffer.

The two reports, read together, demonstrate how as authoritarian leaders accumulate more power and the world becomes less free and more chaotic, the number and gravity of threats facing the United States increases. This is why it is so important to protect our freedoms and support other governments (however imperfect they may be), that share our democratic values. In the dangerous world in which we live, it would be a grave mistake to think that by ignoring tyranny outside our borders, we can somehow avoid its negative effects.