



Ukraine remains at heart of freedom's future

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"The global struggle for democracy approached a possible turning point in 2022," Freedom House writes in its latest annual report on political rights and civil liberties around the world. "There were signs ... that the world's long freedom recession may be bottoming out, which would set the stage for a future recovery."

Freedom shrunk for the 17th straight year over the past 12 months, but did so only slightly this time, with 34 countries growing freer and 35 less free. In addition, "the year's events showed that autocrats are far from infallible, and their errors provide openings for democratic forces. The effects of corruption and a focus on political control at the expense of competence exposed the limits of the authoritarian models offered by Beijing, Moscow, Caracas, or Tehran. Meanwhile, democratic alliances demonstrated solidarity and vigor."

Notwithstanding the hopeful signs, Freedom House notes correctly that we stand at only a "possible" turning point. While globalization was expected to bring the world closer together — with economic integration trumping geopolitical conflict — events of recent days make clear that it's splitting further apart, with battle lines between the free and authoritarian camps becoming more distinct.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine may be the world's hottest flashpoint, but it's becoming a symptom of a larger story. The broader development, and the one that portends another "twilight struggle" for the United States and its allies, is the coalescing of forces among Moscow and other leading autocratic regimes.

That, in essence, is what the critics of U.S. support for Ukraine seem not to recognize.

A U.S. decision to leave Ukraine to its own devices would do nothing to reduce America's global challenges. If anything, it would exacerbate the larger "twilight struggle" — as JFK labeled it more than six decades ago, in an earlier but not dissimilar circumstance — between the free and authoritarian worlds.

Consider recent developments, both symbolic and substantive.

Just days after the International Criminal Court indicted Russian strongman Vladimir Putin for war crimes, China's Xi Jinping visited Moscow and asserted that "political mutual trust is deepening" and "common interests are multiplying" between the two nations as they seek to upend the U.S.-led global order.

While Xi was in Moscow, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was in Kyiv, becoming the latest in a long line of Western leaders to showcase support for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as the West continues to provide economic and military aid to help rebuff Moscow's advances.

Meanwhile, with Russia targeting Kyiv and other cities with drones and fighting remaining fierce in Ukraine's east, the free and authoritarian camps are squaring off in heightened military terms in an expanding proxy war.

China has shipped more than \$12 million in drones to Russia since it invaded Ukraine and, U.S. officials say, is considering more lethal aid.

Iran — an increasingly close partner of China and Russia — continues to send drones to Russia, and the two nations plan to build a drone factory inside Russia that potentially could produce thousands of drones a year. Strengthening their military partnership, Russia is selling advanced Su-35 fighter jets to Iran, which would help Iran control its airspace as Washington and Jerusalem mull how to respond to Tehran's nuclear advancements.

Highlighting their growing ties, China, Russia, and Iran held joint naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman, just days after Beijing complicated U.S. interests in the Middle East by engineering a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia — the former a fierce U.S. adversary, the latter a longstanding U.S. ally.

As China and Iran invest more heavily in Russia's aggression, the United States and its allies are taking note and responding in kind.

The Pentagon announced last week that it's speeding up the timetable for delivering M1 Abrams tanks to Ukraine this Fall.

The U.S. decision came days after Poland and Slovakia — NATO members that border Ukraine and worry about future Russian aggression — announced that they would provide Ukraine with MiG-29 fighter jets.

Now, let's put the Russia-Ukraine war, and the larger proxy war, in an even larger historical context.

With the new version of Freedom in the World, Freedom House has tracked political rights and civil liberties for 50 years. When it began publishing its annual survey in 1973, it labeled “free” just 44 of the world’s 148 countries of that time. This year, it rates 84 of 195 countries “free.” So, even with freedom’s decline for nearly two decades, the world is a far freer place than a half-century ago.

Freedom’s ascent was hardly serendipitous. It resulted in large measure from America’s resolve to both protect and promote democracy.

In Ukraine and elsewhere, we need to continue to defend freedom or suffer the consequences of living in a world of less democracy and more authoritarian adventurism. With the world splintering, the choice seems clear.