

**EU, American and Canadian Approaches to Democracy Promotion:  
Are They Compatible?**  
by Jeffrey Kopstein.

Response by

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Professor Kopstein's argument is predicated on the very reasonable presumption that democracy promotion is here to stay, and will be pursued with varying degrees of conviction by European states and the US. The bulk of his essay focuses on the differing approaches that, broadly speaking, the Europeans and the US use to promote democracy. Kopstein has two main points with respect to developing a Canadian approach to democracy promotion; first, is that Canada can adhere to its perceived historical role of serving as a transatlantic broker to encourage Europeans and Americans to take advantage of their complementary approaches to work together to promote democracy; and second, that Canada can further contribute by picking and choosing the best of both transatlantic approaches and establishing these in the framework of an international institution.

But as Kopstein observes, in a somewhat different context, the devil is in the details - just as it always is, unfortunately. What I want to do in this response to Kopstein's argument is to look at the issue of transatlantic democracy promotion from a different viewpoint, in an effort to elucidate some potentially devilish details - to play, as it were, devil's advocate.

An initial question is whether democracy promotion is here to stay. Almost certainly this observation is correct. More to the point, however, is what is the question of what form will democracy promotion take down the road, and further, whether the energy and focus that will be placed on democracy promotion will remain consistent? Kopstein captures exceptionally well the essence of the differing approaches - a preference for a top down, elite based approach by the Europeans as opposed to a preference for a bottom up, civil society based approach by the Americans -- but precisely how these will translate into policy approaches can and likely will vary considerably, and will do so over time.

The US is an idealist state, stemming from its exceptionalist political culture, that over the years, well before 1989, has sought to promote democracy by a variety of means. At present, the US tends to take a very forthright approach to democracy promotion, defining it as a core security interest, as can be seen in its toppling of President Hussein,<sup>1</sup> through its stated policy of effecting regime change in Iran to the use of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Freedom House, to support the various ‘colour’ revolutions. With the apparent US failure in Iraq and a new president (Democrat or Republican) assuming office in January 2009, the US could swing back towards the less overt approaches it pursued in the late 1970s and through the 1980s. These less overt approaches ranged from to the increasing use of the human rights and other provisions embedded in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in the late 1970s and through the 1980s, the Reagan administration’s constant articulation of the US as a ‘city of light on the hill’ in tandem with very covert support by the CIA to Solidarity in Poland, and the utilization of the World Bank and IMF to lever out of power authoritarian regimes in South America. Given that there may well be a public backlash in the US to Iraq, and given that the earlier approach seemingly worked relatively well, the US after 2008 may return to such an approach to promoting democracy.

This raises the issue of the Europeans’ approach to democracy promotion. Kopstein rightly notes that the Europeans have been quite successful in democracy promotion in Central and East Europe because they could hold out that most golden of gold rings, EU membership with all the benefits that this ostensibly would bring (it must be noted that NATO’s enlargement policy played a significant, and forerunner, role in this regard). European leverage, however, is declining, possibly quite rapidly, for two main reasons. First, EU enlargement has run its course, with there being doubts about some of the current candidate states, and doubts about whether Turkey will meet the the required criteria and be permitted to join.<sup>2</sup> And second, recent accession states have been less than happy with the ‘real’ benefits of being full EU members, as these have not been what they were perceived to be (and possibly they were led to believe they would be).

<sup>1</sup> A key reason for the increasingly discredited ‘neo-cons’, at least, was to install a democracy in Iraq which would contribute significantly, they thought, to spreading democracy in the Middle East.

<sup>2</sup> They will eventually be allowed to join; the current concern is seems mostly of function of fears about the consequences of them joining.

Hence, non-European states (speaking primarily geographically) of concern to the Europeans, such as those around the southern and eastern edges of the Mediterranean, an area of considerable interest to the Europeans for security and immigration reasons, know that EU membership will not be on offer, and furthermore, that any economic benefits that the EU might offer such states very likely will not be as beneficial as advertised (certainly East and Central European states found EU association agreements close to worthless in terms of what they wanted - basically they perceived that their economies were prised open to the EU while the EU stayed fairly closed to them). The EU, with its loss of leverage (and indeed inward focus as it endeavours to deal with the substantial problems current enlargement is posing), in the coming years very likely will be limited in terms of its ability to promote democracy, and indeed may at best only be able and willing to offer a range of significant political, judicial, and economic advice (and some material support) to support and consolidate nascent democracy in non-European states - if these states are willing to accept EU help.

This observation intersects with Kopstein's perceptive observation that the Europeans, in contrast to the US, are as much or possibly even more interested in 'order' than freedom per se. As their political and economic leverage declines, the Europeans increasingly will more be more likely to use what political, economic, social and security instruments that they have to secure stability and order first and foremost. This is very likely the case in the region of most concern to many Europeans, the southern shores of the Mediterranean, as they hope that stability and order in northern Africa, no matter under what the form of governance, will work to reduce the flow of African immigrants. An inherent problem the EU will face is that whatever inducements that the Europeans can bring to bear are unlikely to be sufficient – as an example, the Barcelona Process, inaugurated in 1995, had the aim of promoting democratisation, security and economic growth in the countries to Europe's south and east, yet has not been particularly successful in achieving the results that the EU desired.<sup>3</sup>

This, in a long winded way, brings us back to whether European and American approaches are complementary. The practice of both sides of the Atlantic since 1989 would, as Kopstein rightly notes, suggest that there a degree of complementarity.

<sup>3</sup> See Fred Halliday, 'The "Barcelona process": ten years on', *OpenDemocracy*, 11 November 2005, at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/themes/article.jsp?id=6&articleId=3019>.

However, if one thinks in terms of the European preference for stability and order and the US preference for liberty, the degree of complementarity starts to diffuse. Indeed, in some cases these two preferences could well be in complete variance, with Europeans seeing any American preference to push actively for democracy and freedom as being likely to result in a breakdown in stability that would adversely affect European preferences for order (and indeed adversely affect European economic, political and security interests). This possibility will loom more plausible if the current (and future) American political and military leadership remain as enamoured of such concepts as Barnett's Core-Non-integrating Gap thesis<sup>4</sup> as they currently seem to be, and to the degree that the American leadership continues to perceive the primary source of militancy and terrorism as being political disenfranchisement.

Conversely, the failure of current active efforts at democracy promotion could lead the US – as a backlash to failure in Iraq (and perhaps Afghanistan?), in effect -- to decide that order is preferable, at least over the short to middle term, particularly in regions such as Northern Africa where it is concerned about the real or possible spread of militant Islam. Such a development holds the prospect that Europe and the US could come to share a common goal of order and stability, regardless of the form of government, in that region, if not other regions. Indeed, that the US has deployed military trainers throughout Northern Africa to train local national militaries to enhance their anti-terrorism capabilities, while largely speaking softly to non-democratic states about human rights and other non-democratic governance issues, suggests that the current administration already is more interested in order and stability than democratization (if it was not only ever interested in stability and order in this region).<sup>5</sup> A possible convergence toward a transatlantic preference for order should be tempered with the recognition that not all European states share the same political and economic goals as the US in this region, and hence may be unhappy about American meddling for fear that

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas P.M Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty First Century* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> There is already a degree of transatlantic cooperation in this region aimed to ensure order and stability first and foremost; France and the US have been cooperating, for the most part, in this region in counter terrorism, with the establishment of a US military base in a former French Foreign Legion base in Djibouti being the most visible example.

the more powerful US will push them and their interests aside, as they are less than convinced that the US will be willing to work with them as true, equal partners.

There are two more observations worth noting, even though they are in effect stating the obvious. First, is that promoting and setting up a functioning, effective democracy is extremely difficult. There are many reasons for this, but the primary point is that democracy promotion is an extremely long term project.<sup>6</sup> Hence, as suggested above, there very likely will be an ebb and flow in the interest both in Europe and the US in actual - as opposed to rhetorical - democracy promotion. Second, is that not only is promoting and instilling a democratic political culture difficult, it is potentially fraught with serious risks. It is well to remember that one source of violent militancy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is alienation and disgruntlement with modernity, which is being imposed as much or more through the aegis of 'globalization' – which is translated in many parts of the worlds as capitalism and Westernization with all these entail - than by any direct European or American policies. Democracy, by our lights, is a crucial element of being modern, of being prosperous and peaceful, but that does not mean that it will universally welcomed in other parts of the world. This is in particular possible given that a nascent democracy is very unlikely to work very well, at least at the start, and, given the number of examples out there, possibly over the mid to long term as well; and in the face of a failure of democracy to deliver or simply to dissolve into disorder, some or even many individuals citizens may well decide that the they prefer stability and order first and foremost, and some or many may decide that such imposition, foisted on them by us, should be resisted via militancy. In short, a perception that we, the West, are intent on imposing democracy on regions may well spark a backlash against us.

The foregoing cautions are not meant to obviate Kopstein's policy suggestions, for his proposals have considerable merit. But the above cautionary flags do raise some questions. One is that the possibility of Canada playing a match making role between Europe and the US may be extremely difficult, if not impossible, should the worst case divergence discussed above occur; should Europe and the US find themselves largely in opposition on the issue, Canada at best might be able to help facilitate some small

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<sup>6</sup> The recent unrest in East Timor, which has led to the re-insertion of peacekeeping forces and the re-engagement of the UN, is a pointed example - East Timor was supposed to be easy. The current problems in Bosnia also underscore this point.

compromises on the margins, when there are some commonalities in transatlantic interests on a case by case basis, or work to mitigate the worst political consequences of such an opposition of viewpoints. Whereas should there develop a convergence toward a preference for order over democracy, Canada will be faced with a decision on whether they should participate, and should it do so be seen, in effect, to be supporting non-democratic governments. This seems somewhat problematic with respect to domestic public opinion, whatever Canada's intentions, no matter that Canada very likely is in effect already doing such indirectly, via loans, aid and so on, that are directed to individuals and groups rather than the non-democratic state government. Finally, given that for the most part the Europeans and Americans more often than not approach democracy promotion with a view to ensuring their particular interests, does Canada want to work with them, or would be it preferable to focus the limited means and resources it has available on areas or states that are of little interest to the Europeans and Americans? Canada needs to be wary of the reality that the Europeans and Americans will be most interested in active democracy promotion when they perceive that doing so advances their particular political, economic and security interests.

Kopstein's suggestion that Canada attempt to re-invigorate the Community of Democracies has merit, if only because the concept of such a community has merit. Regrettably, the Community is moribund not simply because of US disinterest. The inherent problem is that institutions take resources to run, indeed, considerable resources, and an effort to institutionalize the Community will take a substantial amount of already scant resources and political will.<sup>7</sup> The UN, the EU, NATO and the OSCE already suffer from a lack of adequate support, and the political will to redress this problem with these established institutions is at best episodic (and then usually still inadequate). A functioning Community of Democracies is at best a very long term project, one that in the end may not bear significant results. Thus, in spite of the conceptual merit of the Community, the question is whether it is easier and more effective to create a new institution with a relatively narrow focus (the fate of the CSCE through its institutionalization as the OSCE to its current state of being very starved of resources is

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<sup>7</sup> Worth noting is that some European states were supportive of the concept as they perceived the possibility that a Community of Democracies could circumscribe American power, and with the US not willing to be involved, they are now hardly enthusiastic.

potentially instructive in this respect) or whether it would be easier and more fruitful in the long run to work to reform current international institutions such as the UN or OSCE, (or possibly even NATO).

Indeed, rather than working to mediate a rapprochement of US and EU approaches to 'democracy promotion', and thereby buy into their particular methods, one has to ask why Canada might not be better served by developing its own comprehensive and integrated strategy of democracy promotion, as Kopstein does imply, but with a view that such a 'Canadian approach' be executed with 'coalitions of the democratically willing' (including NGOs, and the EU and the US if they so desire), to be applied in areas that it deems worthy of effort? Or, to push this point further, one has to ask whether Canada with its limited resources might not be better served if it focuses on human rights, a very important issue which is directly linked to the development of democracy, and work to reform extant institutions so that these are better able to forward and protect human rights?