

DEMOCRACY ON THE BRINK

Lessons from Ancient Greece and the New
Global Struggle Against Autocracy

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Introduction: Old Wine in New Bottles

In the early fifth century BCE, the future of Western civilisation hung by a thread. One of history's most formidable empires—Persia under Darius I and his son, Xerxes—sought to bring the cradle of democracy, Athens, to its knees. Persia's vast military machine, unrivalled in its day, marched relentlessly towards ancient Greece, a collection of fractious city-states that barely constituted a unified front. The Greeks were not just outmatched in size and strength, they were philosophically opposed to the very idea of ever-expanding, territorial empire, which made the contest more profound. Persia sought complete dominion; Athens sought to preserve an idea.

Xerxes succeeded where his father failed. In 480 BCE, his armies descended upon Athens, laying waste to the city. The grand temples and public forum of the Acropolis were reduced to rubble; the symbol of Athenian democracy was literally left smouldering. Twice within the space of 18 months Athens was razed by the Persians. And yet, despite the near destruction of their physical city, it was Athens—and the idea of democracy—which ultimately prevailed. The Greek city-states, under the leadership of both Athens and Sparta, repelled the invaders. Athenian democracy, tenuous and fragile, survived.

Fast forward to the 21st century. We are again witnessing a great assault on democracy—not from a singular empire, but from a coalition of empire-like autocracies stretching from Russia to China to Iran. Like Persia in the time of Xerxes, these powers are not simply threatening nations but imperilling an idea. It is a struggle that transcends borders and military strength, and it asks an existential question: Will liberal democracy, with its messy pluralism and inherent instability, prevail in this new global contest? And more importantly, how will it prevail?

Eastern Promises: Russia, China, and Iran

In February 2022, the world watched in horror as Russia, under the authoritarian leadership of Vladimir Putin, launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The aggression was not only a violation of international law; it was a symbolic attack on the democratic aspirations of the Ukrainian people. Just as Xerxes sought to extinguish the Athenian democracy, Putin seeks to crush the idea of a free, sovereign Ukraine—a democracy on his doorstep. Russia's ambitions, however, are not isolated to Ukraine. They

represent a broader campaign against democratic norms and a rebuke of the liberal international order established after 1945.

China, under the increasingly dictatorial rule of 'President for life', Xi Jinping, represents another angle of this imperial axis. Xi's methods may be less overtly militaristic than Russia's, but nevertheless just as dangerous. The Chinese Communist Party's aims are no less ambitious than its 'no limits' partner. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative has been described as a form of "debt-trap diplomacy", ensnaring developing nations in financial dependence that ultimately serves to extend Chinese influence and undermine democratic governance. Domestically, China's crushing of democratic movements in Hong Kong and its mass surveillance of its own population serve as chilling reminders of how far the regime will go to maintain its grip on power. And its unparalleled military buildup signals only one thing—that China wields a military force designed to assert itself over others.

Iran, meanwhile, stands as a bastion of theocratic authoritarianism in the Middle East. The regime in Tehran has long sought to export its revolutionary ideology, supporting proxy groups throughout the region with the aim of destabilising governments and subverting democratic movements. Everywhere Iran extends itself through proxies—Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen—failed states follow, as well as Gaza. Its repressive internal policies, especially towards women and dissidents, are, totally anathema to liberal democratic ideals of the Western world.

Together, these three powers—Russia, China, and Iran—represent a new axis of autocracy, a modern-day equivalent of the Persian Empire that once sought to bring Athens to heel. Each offers up the false promise of anti-Western 'resistance'. As was true in Xerxes' time, the struggle today is not merely for territory; it is deeply ideological. It is a contest between two fundamentally different visions of how societies should be organised, who benefits and how power is exercised.

The Fragility of Democracy

Democracy has always been fragile, and the current assault from the East underscores just how tenuous it can be. In the West, we often take democracy for granted, as if it were an immutable part of the natural order. History teaches us that democracy is rare. Rarer still is its endurance.

Consider Ancient Greece. After the Greek victories at Salamis and Plataea, which repelled the Persian invasions,

Athens flourished as the intellectual and cultural heart of the ancient world. But even as Athens grew in prestige, its democracy was constantly threatened from within and without. Internal divides and populist demagoguery eroded the foundations of democratic governance. External threats—from Sparta and later Macedonia—ultimately led to the city-state's decline.

Today, we see echoes of this fragility in Western democracies. In the United States, political polarisation has reached unprecedented levels, threatening the very fabric of the democratic process. In Europe, far-right and far-left movements have gained traction, undermining trust in democratic institutions and promoting authoritarian alternatives. All this makes the West even more vulnerable to the variety of threats that seek to undermine it.

The question we face is stark: Can democracy survive in the face of such existential threats, both internal and external? And, if it is to survive, how must we respond?

The New Global Contest

The outcome of this new global contest will not be determined by military strength alone. While NATO and Western alliances provide a necessary counterbalance to Russian and Chinese military aggression, the real battle is for the hearts and minds of ordinary people. Democracy will prevail only if it can prove itself superior—not just militarily, but in terms of governance, economic prosperity, and human dignity.

The battlefield of ideas cannot be vacated by the West. The Athenians understood that their unique political system—based on freedom, participation, and accountability—offered something more appealing than Persian despotism. It was this belief in the intrinsic value of democracy that fuelled their resistance.

Today, we must fight with that same belief. For too long, many in the West have become complacent, assuming that democracy is the default mode of governance. It is not inevitable; it must be constantly nurtured, defended, and reimagined for new generations. This requires a renewed commitment to the principles of freedom, liberty, free trade unions, pluralism, and universal human rights.

How Will the West Prevail?

In order to ensure the survival of democracy against the rising tide of authoritarianism, we must take proactive steps to strengthen and defend democratic values and institutions. Each proposal below offers a concrete path forward, with real-world examples to illustrate how these ideas can be implemented.

1. Strengthening Democratic Institutions

Democracy thrives when its institutions are strong, independent, and transparent. However, institutions in many democratic countries are being undermined from within, often through corruption, political polarisation, and attempts to erode the checks and balances that are essential to maintaining a free and fair society.

For example, in recent years there have been numerous attempts to undermine democratic norms, particularly during and in the aftermath of the 2020 US presidential election. Efforts to challenge the legitimacy of the electoral process—culminating in the January 6th insurrection—highlighted the fragility of democratic institutions. Reforms, such as protecting the independence of the judiciary and safeguarding election systems from political interference, are critical. Proposals like the For the People Act in the US Congress, which aims to address issues like gerrymandering and voter suppression, represent crucial steps toward fortifying the electoral system.

The European Union, too, is ramping up its anti-corruption efforts. In Hungary and Poland, democratic backsliding has seen governments attempting to erode judicial independence and undermine press freedom. The EU has responded by linking access to recovery funds and other financial support to the rule of law, essentially penalising countries that do not adhere to democratic norms. Economic pressure can be an effective means of ensuring that democratic institutions remain robust.

Australia has historically been viewed as a stable and resilient democracy, but recent political developments have exposed vulnerabilities in our nation's institutions, particularly around issues of transparency, corruption, and accountability.

In 2022, Australia established the National Anti-Corruption Commission to address concerns about corruption and integrity within public institutions. The commission's mandate is to investigate corruption federally, holding politicians, public servants, and government contractors accountable. This is a crucial step in ensuring transparency and reinforcing institutional trust. NACC's establishment followed years of media coverage and public campaigning, illustrating how strengthening democratic institutions requires both governmental action and civic engagement.

There is more Australia can do. Expanding NACC's powers to investigate political donations to bolster the integrity of the political system is an important next step.

2. Investing in Civic Education

An insidious threat to democracy is a lack of understanding of democracy's workings. When citizens are uninformed or disengaged, they are more susceptible to populism and authoritarianism. A strong democracy requires a well-educated electorate that understands both their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

Finland, for example, has become a global leader in combating disinformation by introducing media literacy education from an early age. Its schools teach students how to critically evaluate news sources, spot misinformation, and understand the political process. Conversely in the US, civics education has been declining for decades, with fewer students receiving formal instruction on how government works. Initiatives like iCivics, a nonprofit organisation founded by former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, aims to reinvigorate civics education by

providing interactive resources that teach students about democracy. The success of programs like this highlights the need for further investment in civic education to ensure that future generations are well-equipped to participate in the democratic process.

Australia, like many Western democracies, has experienced declining political engagement, particularly among young people. Addressing this requires a renewed emphasis on civics that fosters understanding of democratic systems and responsibilities of citizenship. The Australian Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE) program is being implemented in schools nationwide. This program provides students with an understanding of Australian democracy, its history, and how they can participate. The program covers everything from the Constitution to the role of the judiciary, helping citizens understand the importance of democratic participation.

What more could Australia do? Civic education should be expanded beyond the classroom and integrated into digital literacy programs to help Australians of all ages navigate the complexities of misinformation and disinformation in the modern (social) media landscape. We must also further integrate comprehensive civics education into school curricula, focusing on democratic principles, the rule of law, and the importance of active citizenship – not just turning up to vote every 3 or 4 years.

3. Supporting Democratic Movements Abroad

While it is crucial to strengthen democracy at home, democratic nations also have a responsibility to support movements abroad that fight for the same ideals. Supporting democracy does not mean imposing it through military intervention, but rather providing diplomatic, financial, and moral support to those fighting for their own rights. As Alexander Dumas famously wrote, ‘All for one, and one for all!’

Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Western democracies have rallied behind Ukraine’s struggle for self-determination. In addition to providing military aid, the United States and European nations have imposed economic sanctions on Russia and offered Ukraine significant financial and humanitarian support. This backing has not only helped Ukraine resist Russian aggression but has also sent a message that democracies will stand together against authoritarian threats.

In 2019, millions of Hong Kong citizens took to the streets to protest Beijing’s attempts to erode the city’s autonomy. While Western democracies, particularly the US and the UK, voiced strong support for protestors, their efforts to pressure China were largely symbolic. Going forward, stronger diplomatic and economic measures, such as targeted sanctions or trade restrictions, could signal a more serious commitment to supporting pro-democracy movements in authoritarian states.

Australia has a strong history of middle power engagement in the Asia-Pacific region. We have an important role to play in promoting democracy and human rights.

Australia played a key role in Timor-Leste’s transition to independence and democracy, providing financial, military, and diplomatic support. After years of brutal occupation by Indonesia, Timor-Leste achieved independence in 2002, and Australia continues to support its development through aid and strategic partnerships. This is a clear example of how Australia can assist democratic movements in its region, in addition to exchanges, expanded support for local independent media, promoting the growth of civil society groups and institutions, and supporting free trade unions. Australia should increase its support for pro-democracy groups in post-military coup Myanmar. By providing diplomatic support and sanctioning leaders of the military junta, as well as increasing aid to civil society organisations and refugee programs, Australia can play a more active role in defending democracy in Southeast Asia.

And it is vital Australia continues to expand and enhance its cooperation with the South Pacific Forum in resisting the debt trap diplomacy of Xi’s China. Australia should also continue providing targeted financial aid and resources to democratic movements fighting authoritarian regimes as it has with Ukraine (and playing an active role in the postwar reconstruction of its economy and civil society).

4. Countering Authoritarian Narratives

One of the most effective tools of authoritarian regimes like China and Russia has been their ability to manipulate information and craft narratives that undermine democratic ideals. Whether through state-controlled media or sophisticated disinformation campaigns, these regimes paint democracy as weak, chaotic, and unsustainable. Democracies must not only expose the lies but also offer compelling narratives about the benefits of freedom, liberty, pluralism, and human rights.

Russian state media and ‘troll farms’ have become notorious for spreading misinformation designed to sow discord in Western democracies. During the 2016 US presidential election, Russian interference was widely reported to have exacerbated divisions within American society. In response, organisations like Bellingcat have emerged, dedicated to exposing disinformation campaigns and holding authoritarian regimes accountable through open-source investigations.

China has framed its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a benevolent effort to support global development, but critics argue that it is a form of debt-trap diplomacy that increases China’s influence over developing nations. Democracies must counter these narratives by highlighting the benefits of transparent, accountable governance and the risks of becoming economically dependent on authoritarian regimes.

Australia has faced increasing pressure from China, particularly through economic coercion, trade wars and influence campaigns aimed at undermining democratic discourse. Australia’s response to these challenges has been robust, but more can be done to counter authoritarian narratives. The Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme is a good case in point. Introduced in 2018, this legislation

requires individuals and organisations acting on behalf of foreign entities to register their activities. The scheme is designed to increase transparency around foreign influence in Australian politics and media. It was a direct response to concerns about Chinese interference, including attempts to influence politicians and media narratives.

Australia should enhance its investment in public broadcasting, particularly the ABC’s international service, to promote Australian democratic values and counter Chinese and other authoritarian narratives in the Indo-Pacific region. By expanding ABC broadcasts in local languages across Southeast Asia and the Pacific, Australia can offer an alternative to authoritarian state media in the region. Of particular concern should be promoting narratives that highlight the economic, social, and political benefits of democratic governance, contrasting these with the corruption, repression, and inequality characteristically found in authoritarian states.

And there is still more than can be done. Australia should invest in and support independent media like Bellingcat that fact-check organisations that expose disinformation campaigns and hold authoritarian regimes accountable.

We should also foster global partnerships between democratic nations to combat misinformation, particularly through international forums and agreements.

5. Reaffirming the Value of Alliances

No democracy can stand alone against the global tide of authoritarianism. Just as the Greek city-states allied to defeat Persia, modern democracies must work together to defend the values of freedom, liberty, human rights, and the rule of law. Global alliances like NATO, the EU, and new coalitions between democratic nations must adapt to the changing nature of authoritarian threats, including (state and increasingly non-state) cyber-attacks, economic coercion, and disinformation.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been a cornerstone of Western defence against authoritarian aggression. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, NATO has reinforced its eastern flank, providing military support to member states and increasing joint exercises. This show of unity has helped deter further Russian aggression and demonstrated the power of collective security against bullies.

Australia is a key player in global alliances, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, where it helps to counterbalance China’s growing influence. Strengthening these alliances will be essential in the defence of democracy. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), an alliance between the US, India, Japan, and Australia, has emerged as a key force in countering China’s influence in the Indo-Pacific. The Quad’s focus on maritime security, infrastructure development, and humanitarian assistance offers a democratic alternative to China’s BRI, showing how alliances can extend beyond military defence to promote democratic values. In time the Quad should be expanded to include and unite democracies in the Indo-Pacific to counter authoritarianism. Singapore

and the Philippines would be good fits.

The Australia-United States Alliance (ANZUS) has been a cornerstone of Australian defence policy since it was signed in 1951. In recent years, this alliance has expanded to include a focus on countering China’s growing influence in the Indo-Pacific. Australia’s involvement in AUKUS, a security pact with the US and the UK aimed at increasing cooperation on defence technologies (including nuclear submarines), demonstrates the country’s commitment to reinforcing democratic alliances. We should be doubling down on Pillars II and III of this Agreement, building sovereign capability in hi-tech, most notably Artificial Intelligence.

Australia must continue to build stronger alliances within ASEAN member states to promote democracy and stability. While some ASEAN nations are not fully democratic, Australia can work to strengthen democratic norms through trade partnerships, development aid, and regional forums. And, in the manner of the US, we should foster new alliances between democracies that focus on shared challenges, such as climate change, economic inequality, and technological innovation, to create a global democratic front that is as united as it is diverse.

A Call to Action

The story of Persia’s failed attempt to conquer Greece is more than just an ancient tale of military strategy. It is a reminder that democracy, while fragile, has the power to endure even the most formidable assaults—if those who believe in it are willing to fight for it. Today, we are once again at a crossroads. The forces of autocracy are on the rise, and the future of democracy is uncertain. But if history teaches us anything, it is that the defence of democracy is not a passive act. It requires vigilance, courage, and a deep belief in the principles that make it worth defending.

As a middle power with a long-standing commitment to democratic values, Australia plays a crucial role in the global defence of democracy. Through strengthening its institutions, investing in civic education, supporting democratic movements abroad, countering authoritarian narratives, and reaffirming alliances, Australia can help ensure that democracy prevails in the face of rising authoritarianism. By learning from both its own experiences and the lessons of history, Australia stands as a critical player in the ongoing global struggle for freedom and self-determination.

In 490 BCE, 100,000 Persians landed in Attica intending to conquer Athens, but were defeated at the Battle of Marathon by a Greek army of 9,000 Athenian warriors and hoplites supplemented by 1,000 Plataeans, led by the Athenian general, Miltiades. The Battle of Marathon was a watershed in the Greco-Persian wars. It showed the Greeks, united and imbued with self-belief, that the Persians could be beaten. Who is the 21st century West’s Miltiades? As we confront the

challenges posed by Russia, China, and Iran, we must remember that democracy is more than a system of government—it is an idea, one that has inspired people for millennia – and we will require a multitude of leaders focused on strengthening democracy, not just turning this way and that according to the latest polling numbers. Just as the Athenians stood against the might of Xerxes, so too must we stand against the forces that seek to undermine freedom today. The question is no longer whether democracy can prevail. Are we willing to make the necessary investment in our institutions, alliances, and principles to ensure it does? The answer to that question will determine freedom’s future in the 21st century. It won’t be a sprint, but a marathon.

About the author

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