Commentary
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Double-Edged Sword of Democracy Promotion

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Summary

The domestic political manoeuvres in the US and other Western nations surrounding the presidential elections in Venezuela once again highlight the detrimental impact of democratic populism on the West's own interests.

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The Venezuelan presidential election held on 28 July garnered significant international attention. The results are predominantly analysed through the lens of Venezuela's internal situation and the responses from various foreign countries to the officially announced election outcomes. Observers are primarily concerned with one question: How accurate and legitimate are these results?

The question, it should be noted, has become commonplace. While just a decade ago it regularly emerged only within electoral campaigns outside the Western world, today it is heard almost everywhere. One need only recall the recent US presidential elections or listen to the current American campaign to see this. The depth and scale of socio-political polarization are growing at an exponential rate across the globe. If this trend continues, scenes where defeated politicians shake hands with winners and pass over the reins of power with a smile will soon become archival footage.

It is possible that along with them, another narrative might gradually fade into the archives, a narrative that has long set the international backdrop for any elections in any non-Western country. This narrative concerns the connection between the internal politics of Western states—primarily the United States—and the stance of these states on the outcomes of elections in various countries. In other words, how many non-Western

states effectively find themselves dependent on the current domestic political dynamics in the United States and other Western countries. Perhaps one day this dependence will be broken, as much of the ongoing transformation of the international relations system towards greater polarity is related to it. However, it remains a fact of life for now, as evidenced once again by the events surrounding the Venezuelan elections.

Diplomatic Roller Coaster

On 1 August, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken **announced** that the United States does not accept the official results of the Venezuelan elections, which declared incumbent President Nicolas Maduro the winner. Instead, they recognize opposition candidate Edmundo Gonzalez as the victor. Similar statements have been made by several other countries, although, strictly speaking, international law does not provide a legal procedure for external legitimization of elections. Meanwhile, many nations are urging Caracas to provide detailed data on the election results across various regions, and some have already congratulated Maduro on his re-election.

> This situation increasingly mirrors events from six years ago, following the 2018 presidential election when the global community was similarly divided over recognizing Maduro as the president.

At that time, the scenario was particularly convoluted. Six months after the election, Western countries did not recognize the opposition candidate but instead recognized Juan Guaidó, the Speaker of the National Assembly, as the president. Over 50 countries supported this decision, simultaneously imposing strict sanctions on Caracas. The Trump administration announced a policy of "maximum pressure." However, it soon became evident that neither Guaidó's proclaimed government nor the Western countries backing him could alter the political status quo in Venezuela. Despite severe economic hardships and extensive external pressure, Maduro managed to regain full control of the state.

Simultaneously, efforts were made by third-party countries, mainly Norway but also others, to facilitate dialogue between the Venezuelan government and the opposition to find a way out of the crisis. Both Maduro and his opponents were generally open to negotiations, but they failed to reach agreements on key issues. The talks fluctuated, at times gaining momentum and offering hope for a positive outcome, only to stall for extended periods. Meanwhile, calls from the US and several European and Latin American capitals alternated between advocating for increased pressure or a relaxation

of it on Caracas. There were instances where these countries reaffirmed their support for Guaidó and the opposition until a decisive victory, only to later **downgrade** Guaidó from acting president to a "privileged interlocutor."

In October 2023, after the Venezuelan opposition had already sidelined Juan Guaidó, Maduro **announced** the imminent signing of an agreement with his opponents aimed at promoting peace and the upcoming elections. At the same time, the US declared it was suspending the most severe sanctions against Venezuela. However, in April 2024, these sanctions were **reinstated** due to the lack of anticipated political progress within the country.

> Even this brief overview of the shifting positions of Washington and other Western capitals toward Venezuela over the past few years reveals a kind of foreign policy roller coaster.

In simpler terms, it shows a constant swing from one extreme to another: from harsh sanctions and a policy of "maximum pressure" to the sudden lifting of sanctions and promising conciliatory statements. And this is just in the last six years. A longer retrospective would highlight even more dramatic swings in US foreign policy.

Such constant shifts can be explained by the lack of desired results regarding a country of significant strategic importance to the US. To grasp this significance, one only needs to consider Venezuela's vast oil reserves or the migration flows from this country to North America. A glance at the map and a reminder of the legendary **Monroe Doctrine**, which envisions Washington's unchallenged dominance in the Western Hemisphere, also underline this importance. However, that’s not all.

"Our Citizens Will Ridicule Us as Fools"

These understandable geostrategic considerations are compounded by another factor: domestic politics in the US and, to a lesser extent, other Western countries. This factor operates as follows: The regular election cycles in Western democracies ensure that any publicly significant issues become subjects of political debate and speculation. In other words, everything covered in the news is leveraged by politicians as arguments in election campaigns. They all strive to spin these issues in a way that will win votes from their opponents and boost their own political standing.

This also extends to foreign policy. In fact, it might apply even more to foreign policy than to domestic issues. The consequences of decisions regarding other countries are generally less impactful for their own voters compared to matters like the economy or

social welfare. Therefore, Western politicians feel less accountability for their words and slogans on foreign policy topics. The risks are lower.

Moreover, Western politicians can always make what seems like a fail-safe bet on the themes of democracy and human rights advocacy worldwide. These themes are fundamental to the Western political worldview, which children start to absorb almost from birth. This is especially true in the United States, a country founded on the rejection of Old World political tyranny. The idea of democracy, regardless of current opinions, is ingrained in American DNA. This automatically shapes the worldview of most Americans, which in turn sets public expectations for politicians and outlines a sense of mission.

Until the 20th century, these characteristics were not as strongly felt outside the United States. Firstly, the US had not yet achieved a dominant position relative to other world powers, making it difficult for Washington to intervene in the affairs of other countries even if it wanted to. Secondly, American authorities did not show much desire to intervene, limiting their "zone of privileged interests" to the Western Hemisphere.

Things began to change in the 20th century. The US' highly advantageous geostrategic position minimized security challenges and fostered economic growth. This economic power was accompanied by an increase in military-political and diplomatic capabilities. By the end of World War II, the US had become the only true superpower, partly due to its foundational role in global finance. This newfound status quickly influenced its foreign policy outlook: the US could now afford to spread its vision of right and wrong worldwide.

> Woodrow Wilson was the first US president to prominently declare democratic missionism as the cornerstone of American foreign policy. Since then, the promotion of democracy has consistently accompanied the fundamental foreign policy goal of any state—pursuing its own interests.

This approach has proven to be a brilliant American innovation, allowing the US to pursue its goals like other great powers while maintaining a noble image in the eyes of much of the global community. European countries have adopted this practice in recent decades.

However, this approach has a downside. It leads to frequent shifts in policy influenced by public opinion. When Western politicians and diplomats emphasize democracy and human rights in their foreign policy to appeal to voters, they often come across as principled defenders of democratic ideals. This stance appears virtuous and seemingly

risk-free to those unfamiliar with international complexities. Yet, promoting democracy is easy in theory but difficult in practice. Political and economic sanctions—tools often employed under the banner of democracy—rarely achieve effective results. Venezuela serves as a vivid example of this challenge.

Moreover, these tools rarely yield quick results. However, politicians always want to appeal to voters, and electoral cycles are constant. As a result, the promotion of democracy often resembles a roller coaster. Yesterday, sanctions were imposed with no immediate effect, so today they are lifted. When the desired results still do not materialize, sanctions are reinstated, only to be intensified and expanded the next day. Despite the lack of results, politicians from all sides will claim they are fervently fighting against autocrats and other tyrants, especially when there is an electorally significant diaspora from the affected country or region, as in the case of Venezuela.

> This creates a particular form of populism—democratic populism.

Here I recall a conversation with a senior European diplomat in the summer of 2020. I explained to him that if the EU and the US imposed sanctions on Minsk following the Belarusian presidential elections, they would not only fail to achieve their stated objectives but would inevitably produce the opposite effect. Furthermore, given Belarus's geopolitical role, the West could destabilize regional security and complicate its own position in Eastern Europe. The diplomat agreed with my analysis and the resulting argument but added: *"But we can't not respond, because then our citizens will ridicule us as fools. And the only response we have is sanctions."*

Four years later, when my forecast has (unfortunately!) proven to be 100 per cent accurate, I would like to ask that diplomat and all other ardent sanctions populists: How do you and your policies now appear in the eyes of the electorate? When you fear public criticism so much that you adopt popular measures today which predictably undermine your country's interests tomorrow, what do you call that?

Domestic Policy in the West and National Interest

This leads us to the main conclusion: The “political roller coaster” in Western foreign policy, driven by public opinion, not only harms the countries targeted by fluctuating sanctions but also directly damages the Western countries themselves. It undermines their strategic positions globally.

Researchers who strictly adhere to the paradigm of realism in international relations might argue that all this talk about democracy and pandering to domestic audiences is merely informational noise. According to this view, all states, whether democratic, autocratic, or otherwise, are ultimately guided by pragmatic interests. They would be largely correct, as over long periods, states' foreign policies generally align with their national interests.

> However, consistently making populist decisions that contradict one's own interests—decisions that may not seem overly dangerous at the moment— leads to the accumulation of a critical mass of errors. Eventually, this must bring to a moment of reckoning.

The ingenious strategy devised by Woodrow Wilson can work effectively only as long as it does not critically exceed its bounds. This means it can function well until systemic overreach occurs and until the dominant resources of the US allow for neglect of nuances in various regions.

However, the accumulation of errors eventually leads to a reduction in resources and undermines the competitive advantages of the West. Especially now, as internal political factors in Western states, combined with their economic and military dominance, encourage many non-Western governments to strive to alter existing balances and transform the international system. Therefore, strategically aligning with national interests will increasingly require the US and the West to find ways to limit the impact of domestic populism on foreign policy.

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