
International Education in the Twenty-First Century

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In 1965, just years after an international system rife with mistrust and misunderstanding brought the world to the brink of nuclear war, President Johnson declared that "...growth and the spread of learning must be the first work of a nation that seeks to be free ... that certain truths are self-evident in every nation on this earth; that ideas, not armaments, will shape our lasting prospects for peace."¹ This speech marked the moment when international education effectively became a pillar of America's national security strategy.

Today, international education continues to be one of the most potent tools democratic nations have to not only shape a world conducive to their own existence, but to bring an end to authoritarian rule across the globe. Convincing evidence of this assertion put forward by Howard Sanborn and Clayton Thyne supports what we already inherently know: when young men and women are able to access quality higher education, authoritarian regimes in those countries will eventually fade into history.² The correlation between higher education and the fall of authoritarian regimes has also not been lost on those who seek to maintain their hold on power in shadowy corners of the world like North Korea, Equatorial Guinea, and Turkmenistan. International education has the potential to transform such repressive nations in the coming decades, leaving the world a freer and safer place. But new and emerging challenges must be addressed if it is to succeed.

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THE INTERNET, CENSORSHIP, AND EDUCATION

Today, the very concept of international education is evolving as the Internet transforms how young people access information in even the most isolated regions of the world. The Internet makes possible entirely new modes of international education from distance learning programs, self-taught study to informal education through sites such as the Khan

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Academy or Udacity. However, repressive governments around the world are sensing that this free information and learning exchange has the potential to outstrip their capacity to censor education and they are redoubling their censorship efforts. Earlier this year Turkey's parliament amended a law that effectively codifies Internet censorship, and many students and university faculty see the law as a pathway to

severely limit academic freedom.³ Other censorship regimes like those in China, Vietnam, and Thailand regularly block educational content that provides alternative points of view to those held by the ruling party. The power of the Internet to exponentially expand the availability of international education should make universal access to an uncensored Internet a top global priority.

FEAR OF EDUCATION

What began as a nascent concern among authoritarian regimes of educated youth challenging their power quickly became a preeminent threat to regime stability, as the Arab Spring unseated seemingly unshakable regimes. The response that resulted from this mounting fear can at least in part be illustrated by my own experience working with students in Turkmenistan at the time. It was in late 2011 that the Turkmen authorities began a full-scale assault on U.S. funded educational programs, as Berdymuhammedov's regime became increasingly paranoid after the fall of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. The regime's fear of its English speaking, Western-educated youth was palpable throughout the country. High school students participating in English and SAT classes were taken in for questioning by the state police, college students returning home were interrogated and placed under surveillance, English teachers

were arrested, kidnapped and fined exorbitant fees, and many foreign universities were banned from advertising inside the country. Three years later many of these teachers and students are still being punished for their efforts to access Western style higher education.

THE DOUBLE EDGED SWORD

To a certain extent, authoritarian regimes are succeeding in shaping the educational decisions of their youth. The retribution that young people living under these paranoid rulers may face when trying to access an international education drives them to seek other, less provocative options. For students from Turkmenistan this means studying in Belarus and Russia, an educational experience that only reinforces the Turkmen government's propaganda and rhetoric. Other students simply forgo higher education altogether.

This type of fear and backlash against Western education also reveals an important paradox that authoritarian regimes are facing. While well-educated and freethinking youth pose a significant threat to the ability of these regimes to stay in power, these countries also recognize that they need and in fact will rely on the same educated class of youth to drive economic growth and development. This paradox also presents an important opportunity for democratic regimes to promote international education, in the context of economic competitiveness, to regimes that would otherwise resist and fear such activities. China has long recognized this paradox: in 2011-2012 more than a quarter of all foreign students studying in the United States were Chinese.⁴ Time will tell if Beijing is able to mitigate the challenge these educated youth will pose to the party's hold on power.

The twentieth century was a time when we learned the tragic consequences of ignorance and the violence it too often breeds. This is a pattern we are again witnessing: 2014 revealed an eighth straight year of more global declines than gains in democracy, the emergence of the self-named Islamic State, and a bold display of Russian power and aggression in Ukraine.⁵ These events should serve as a call for renewed commitment by the United States and other democratic nations to address, in word and deed, the challenges international education faces in the twenty-first century.

We must choose how we want to play the long game, as President Johnson did in 1965. It's not about what we want the world to look like next year, it's about the vision we have for the world in the next century. Education is the one possession that, once gained, can never be stripped away; its value will remain constant even in the face of war,

economic turmoil, or political upheaval. The future is always uncertain, but international education is perhaps the only guaranteed investment we can make in advancing freedom around the world. *f*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks at the Smithsonian Bicentennial Celebration," September 16, 1965. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27262>> (accessed November 18, 2014).
- 2 Howard Sanborn and Clayton L. Thyne. 2013. "Learning Democracy: Education and the Fall of Authoritarian Regimes." *British Journal of Political Science*. 44: 773-797, doi:10.1017/S0007123413000082, (accessed November 18, 2014).
- 3 Giancarlo Frosio, February 14, 2014 (3:39 a.m.), comment on Turkish Internet censorship, "Turkey Enlists Intermediaries to Censor and Surveil Internet Users," *CIS Blog*, February 14, 2014, <<http://cyberlaw.stanford.edu/blog/2014/02/turkey-enlists-intermediaries-censor-and-surveil-internet-users>> (accessed November 18, 2014).
- 4 "International Students in the United States," *Institute of International Education*, <<http://www.iie.org/Services/Project-Atlas/United-States/International-Students-In-US>> (accessed November 19, 2014).
- 5 "Freedom in the World 2014," *Freedom House*, <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2014#.VHN6P1ff9ig>> (accessed November 20, 2014).