While the rise of violent Islamism has transfixed the world, another, graver threat—21st-century autocracy—is gathering strength. In the long run, it is sophisticated autocrats, not bearded zealots, who pose the greater menace to democracy. This is the message of two outstanding new essays.

In a piece for the U.K.’s Henry Jackson Society, David Clark argues that “the great wave of global democratic change that began in the mid-1970s—doubling the number of electoral democracies in the space of three decades—has come to an end. Instead, we are now confronted with a powerful authoritarian backlash that is reversing some of these gains and encouraging a resurgence of anti-democratic ideas.”

Although the new authoritarianism often draws on national sentiments, it is anything but backward-looking. It takes into account globalization, rising prosperity and digital communications, says Mr. Clark, and it has developed “new techniques of control and
new justifications for monopolizing power that enable autocratic leaders to resist pressure for democratic change.”

Unlike 20th-century totalitarians, the new autocrats suppress political and civil rights only to the extent needed to maintain control. They adeptly manipulate the facade of democratic procedures. Contrary to the optimistic predictions of modernization theories, they co-opt their countries’ rising middle classes. They draw on cultural exceptionalism—such as with the “Asian values” debate in the 1990s—to resist the universal claims of democracy and human rights. And increasingly, they are forming leagues of mutual support.

“The rise of the new authoritarianism,” Mr. Clark concludes, “shows that democracy is not the inevitable outgrowth of modernization and economic development. Instead, the case for it has to be made and won at a political level.” This is sobering. The war on terror divided the democratic world, and the aftermath of the Great Recession has left it drifting.

The result, says Mr. Clark: “a loss of self-confidence that has undermined the democracy’s appeal.” Middle classes and elites from the global South are looking to China and Singapore as models. Even in Europe, populism and nativism are challenging long-established democratic norms.

In short, democracy is not the default setting for governance, and “history” does not inexorably produce it. When democratic governments fail to meet public aspirations, non-democratic alternatives gain support. We saw this movie in the 1930s. It did not end well.

Writing in the forthcoming issue of the Journal of Democracy, Columbia University’s Alexander Cooley traces the ways in which the new authoritarians have reshaped domestic and international institutions to their advantage. They have used post-9/11 counterterrorism norms to suppress domestic dissent. They have cracked down on nongovernmental organizations, which they portray as agents of foreign influence. In their place, they are creating a network of pseudo-NGOs, including fake election monitors. Appealing to anti-imperialist resentment, they have turned regional alliances to anti-democratic purposes.

They have formed new organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which brings together China, Russia and the autocracies of Central Asia. Wealthier autocracies, especially China and the Gulf States, are using international development
lending to build networks of nondemocratic regimes that are happy to receive funds without pro-democratic strings attached. And as Western countries have retreated from international newsgathering and broadcasting, Russia, China and Qatar have surged forward.

“If the West were to reduce its support for liberal norms and a rule-based international order for the sake of political expediency,” says Mr. Cooley, “it would only hasten the erosion of its own normative standing.” Translation: So-called realism cedes the field to the enemies of democracy.

How best to put democracy back on the offensive? Mr. Clark’s formula: Intensify their cooperation. This means working together to meet the economic and social aspirations of their citizens. It means seeing one another as their most important partners—for trade, diplomacy and collective security.

Above all, it means that the world’s democracies must band together in a new institution—a Concert of Democracies—that takes democratic internationalism as its guiding principle. During the past decade, proposals for such an organization have been put forward by liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans. It’s time to build on efforts such as the Community of Democracies established in Warsaw in 2000 to give democratic internationalism a powerful new focus.

Understandably, the American people are preoccupied with domestic concerns. It is the task of aspirants for national office to remind the people that, in the 21st century, no nation is an island. Will the candidates of both parties rise to the challenge?