

Palo Alto Rotary Pinion

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CREATE
LASTING
IMPACT

Celebrating 104 years of Service

CREATE LASTING IMPACT 2026-2027

Los Altos/Palo Alto Rotary Joint Assembly

Mitchell Park Community Center, Palo Alto

President **CHARLIE WEIDANZ** of the Palo Alto Rotary Club, welcomed nearly 200 members and guests from three Rotary Clubs: Los Altos, Palo Alto and Palo Alto/University.

President **FRANK ELMER**, of the Los Altos Rotary Club led the joint pledge and emphasized the collaboration between Los Altos and Palo Alto clubs and introduced our speaker, Professor Michael McFaul of Stanford University, former U.S. Ambassador to the Russian Federation (2012-2014).

Professor McFaul received a Rotary scholarship from Glasgow, MT, that supported his early undergraduate studies at Stanford. He highlighted the impact of Rotary support on his career. He has written ten books and encouraged attendees to consider purchasing his most recent book *Autocrats vs Democrats*.

PROGRAM

Cold War Legacy and Democratic Momentum

- The Cold War ended with the collapse of communism, ushering in a brief era of global democratic optimism.
 - The 1990s saw collective international action against Saddam Hussein, reinforcing the perceived effectiveness of the liberal order.
- The Rise of a New Cold War



- McFaul explains how Russia's actions have shifted global dynamics toward a new great-power rivalry.
- He highlights the escalation from diplomatic tensions to armed conflict, noting the potential nuclear threat.

Causes of Great Power Competition

- Power shifts show China and Russia gaining momentum challenging the United States to increase tension.
- Autocratic governance in China heightens conflict risk, because democracies rarely wage war.

Democratic Decline and Autocratic Rise

- The United States and the democratic world have experienced a 20-year democratic decline, while autocratic leaders like Vladimir Putin grow more confident.
- Freedom House scores illustrate this global trend, and democratic movements such as the Orange Revolution threaten autocratic regimes increasing their anxiety and paranoia against the West.

Putin Criticizes U.S. Regime-Change Policies

- McFaul, who was a senior Obama administration official at the time, described Putin's 58-minute critique of Bush-era regime changes.
- The speaker noted Obama's agreement that the Iraq war was a mistake, a first for a U.S. president.

Russia's 2011 Election and the Rise of Protest Movements



- The 2011 Russian election sparked widespread protests over alleged falsification.
- Putin blamed foreign influence, fueling fears that led to his 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Russian-Western Relations and Putin's Rhetoric

- McFaul recounts a 2011 Moscow visit where Medvedev supported the U.S. Libya intervention, revealing a split with Putin.
- Putin's remarks emphasize Russia's cultural distinctness from the West, framing his leadership as necessary for national governance.

Ukrainian Identity and Democratic Threats

- McFaul related that Putin considers Ukrainians are merely Russians with accents, arguing that their democratic progress threatens autocratic regimes like Russia and Xi Jinping's China.
- #### **Impact of Individual Leaders on Great Power Competition**
- Political science often ignores leaders' causal impact on policy shifts.
 - Putin and Xi have increased aggression through personal foreign-policy ideas.

- U.S. elections in 2016 and 2020 pivoted policy toward Russia and China.
- #### **Ideological Struggle Now Inside States**
- McFaul explained that modern ideological conflict occurs within states, not between them as was common during the Cold War Era.
 - McFaul noted that since he left the government he has sought out a variety of national podcasts to discover that many illiberal nationalist podcasters reject his views.

The Modern Cold War and China's Economic Interdependence

- The speaker compares the current U.S.-China rivalry to the Cold War, noting ideological competition will persist for decades.
- He argues that China's economic integration makes a global "blue-team/red-team" split unrealistic and warns against misreading Xi Jinping's ambitions.

Cold War Lessons and Modern Alliances

- The speaker argues modern alliances differ from Cold War splits.
- He stresses learning past mistakes despite the Cold War victory.

Lessons from Cold War Foreign Policy

- The speaker warns against repeating past mistakes in foreign alliances.
- He emphasizes the value of soft power instruments like USAID and NED.

Strategic Defense and Alliance Concerns

- The speaker urges stronger military, more drones, fewer Trump ships.
- He criticizes Trump's policies, citing weakened alliances and the lack of democracy promotion.



Polarization Weakens U.S. Foreign Policy

- Isolationist policies and withdrawal from multilateral organizations weakened U.S. influence.
- Domestic polarization hampers coherent foreign policy and collective action against autocrats.

Democracy's Economic Edge Over China

- Democracies collectively hold more economic power than autocracies.
- China's growth slowed as state control increased and inequality rose.

Historical Cycles of Democratic Resilience

- Past crises in the 1930s and 1960s showed democracies can endure despite authoritarian threats.
- Current events in Ukraine illustrate ongoing struggles for democratic ideals.

Global Democratic Alliances and American Perception

- The speaker emphasizes that a 2028 president can restore traditional allies.
- He notes that most Americans oppose Trump's alliance-breaking policies.

Questions and Answers

Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Leadership

Can a new president fix the Trump damage? McFaul answered yes and has an essay posted on Substack with details explaining his thinking. In short, the fact that over 80% of Americans agree that Putin is a bad actor. Trump is seen as out of step with public sentiment.

- Chinese Multilateral Influence Strategy

Can you elaborate on China's strategy to increase its global influence?

- China seeks to increase influence within existing multilateral institutions without dismantling them.
- China creates new regional organizations to dominate global governance structures.
- Western powers must engage constructively to counterbalance China's expanding multilateral reach.

Military Intervention and Democratic Concerns in Venezuela

Will Venezuela become a free and economically viable state post Maduro?

- The speaker opposes military force for regime change in Venezuela.

- He argues that U.S. intervention would amount to imperialism.
 - The speaker stresses the need for democratic support, not force.
 - Trump's presidency threatens Venezuelan property rights protection and is at odds with U.S. oil companies' interests.
 - Free, fair elections would secure legitimate governance and investor confidence because a democratically elected government would be more inclined to protect companies' interests.
- Trump-Putin Alignment and 2016 Interference

Is Trump a Putin puppet?

The speaker does not know but fact points that Trump and Putin have shared illiberal nationalism and ideological alignment. He also related a personal story which illustrated the security concerns inside Russia which prompted extraordinary measures to avoid Russian surveillance in Moscow hotels.

- He also pointed to the overwhelming evidence from Mueller and Senate Intelligence reports showing Russia influenced the 2016 election.

Engaging Across Ideological Divides

What are three things we can do to address our internal polarization?

- Voting.
- Engaging with dissenting voices sharpens arguments and reduces echo chambers.
- Protecting elections requires active observation and open dialogue.

CLOSING

President CHARLIE thanked our speaker and all who attended this very special event!

UPCOMING PROGRAMS & EVENTS

October 5 12:15 - 1:30 PM Club Meeting	Chris Witzell, LWV of Palo Alto, Topic: Prop. 40 The Billionnaire's Tax Pros and Cons
October 12 12:15 - 1:30 PM Club Meeting	Candidates Forum: Palo Alto City Council Moderator, Gennady Sheyner, Palo Alto Weekly

October 19 12:15 - 1:30 PM Club Meeting	Ray Purpur, Deputy Director of Athletics - Capital Projects The Game is Changing: What's Happening in College Athletics - and Why Stanford Matters
October 26 12:15 - 1:30 PM Club Meeting	Daniel H. Wilson, Author <i>"Hole in the Sky"</i> and the Role of Science and Science Fiction in Understanding our World