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# Not Just a Summit: Building the Democracy Support Engine Room

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Democracy should not be given a secondary place in foreign relations—desirable but dispensable; supported through projects but not through politics. Rather than making the Biden administration's democracy summit the center of attention, discussion and political energies should focus on reviewing policies and practices ahead of it. Given that the internal governance of states increasingly permeates all aspects of foreign policy, the EU alongside the United States should consider the following key points about democracy support.

Democracy support needs to start at home—democracies are judged by how effectively they deal with their own political extremism, autocratization, or severe polarization. Democracy support needs to be more than projects and has to encompass all aspects of foreign policy. It needs to avoid the framing trap of "conservatives against liberals." Democracy support is not about imported "regime change," but being on the side of people who stand up for their right to participate in politics through elections or otherwise.

Finally, a new cold war should be avoided, but where elements of one exist already—for example, when authoritarian regimes manipulate democratic discourse—democracies cannot ignore this.

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## Introduction

Since the storming of the Capitol incited by President Donald Trump in January, there has been some soul-searching in Washington about the role of the United States in international democracy support. One view is encapsulated in the headline "Is America Seriously Going to Lecture Other Countries About Democracy Now"?[1] The opposite one is that U.S. engagement is more important than ever in a global context of democratic decline.

Joe Biden made democracy a central part of his platform when he ran for president. After four years in which the United States suffered an onslaught on democratic rules and norms that was not imaginable before, his administration will be even more focused on questions of democracy at home and abroad. Biden's intention to convene a summit for democracy is a tangible expression of this.

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The administration will approach democracy questions with a sense of trauma. It is one thing to watch the work of destructive authoritarians from afar and another to become their victim. As part of this, a rethink of democracy support is likely, with less "shining city on the hill" rhetoric and more sense of shared danger.

Europe should not just wait and see how the Biden administration approaches the issue; it should aim to shape a new joint understanding of the place of democracy in foreign relations. This can build on the European Union's Council conclusions of 2019,[2] in the European Democracy Action Plan,[3] and in remarks by its foreign policy chief Joseph Borrell.[4] The outlook of the Biden administration is likely to be attuned to sentiments on this matter in Europe, where U.S. triumphalist rhetoric has raised eyebrows in the past.

How should the EU position itself? A minimal approach would be to provide a bit more funding for democracy projects, while the maximal option would be to embark on a new Cold War between democracies versus autocracies. Below are seven recommendations that lie between these extremes.

## Start at Home

Even before the Trump presidency descended into a revolt against democratic institutions, Biden's platform made clear that the United States should lead by example and start by repairing democracy at home. This is the right approach.

The EU should follow suit as its credibility and soft power beyond its borders is strongly correlated with its internal developments. The EU is no longer the community of democracies it was a decade ago. Its institutions and member states have not marshalled the political will to stop Hungary's government building a semi-authoritarian state and they have not managed to stop Poland's government in its takeover of the judiciary. These problems will only become worse if EU institutions and member states continue with their half-hearted responses.

The autocratization of Hungary and Poland stands out, but that does not mean the other EU members are model democracies. All struggle to push back aggressive anti-democratic forces, which include significant political parties. The influence of big business or lack

1 Joshua Keating, "Is America Seriously Going to Lecture Other Countries About Democracy Now?" Slate, January 7, 2021.

2 Council of the EU, "Council Conclusions on Democracy," October 14, 2019.

3 European Commission, "Protecting European democracy from interference and manipulation – European Democracy Action Plan," 2020.

4 Josep Borrell, "We need straight-talk and determined action on democracy," European External Action Service, November 24, 2020.

of transparency remain major concerns almost everywhere.

Against that background, recognizing domestic problems and challenges with humility is crucial. It should not result in relativism, however. The citizens of transatlantic democracies enjoy incomparably more freedoms than those of autocracies. They are not humiliated into pretending that their government or leader has no faults. They have many options to participate in shaping politics, and they can rely on the rule of law and on independent judges to enforce it. For example, as terrible as the Trump presidency was for democracy, U.S. judges have shown that their allegiance is to the rule of law, not to a party or a president, in dealing with unfounded allegations of electoral fraud. In the majority of countries in the world this would be unthinkable.

Avoiding a sense of relativism and defeatism is also crucial. The United States and European countries should be open and accurate about their democracy deficits. Processes such as the annual assessment of the rule-of-law situation in each EU member provide a good basis for facts-based self-criticism. But this should not hold back the United States and the EU from pursuing democracy-related goals in their foreign policy.

## Projects versus Politics

In discussions of the place of democracy in foreign relations, the talk is often about funding for democracy-support projects. But these are only one of many policy tools. They are useful as an indicator that a country cares about people's rights beyond its own borders, but they are not the answer to how deal overall with democracy in foreign policy.

The focus on these support projects reveals a thinking that sees democracy as secondary to hard foreign policy issues. It is not. Democracy more than ever permeates all aspects of foreign policy—be it relations with China and Russia the future of multilateral institutions, or for the EU the situation in some of its members, candidate countries and neighbors such as Turkey. Democracy is the watchword of all discussions aimed at regulating social media and other parts of the Internet or artificial intelligence. Democratic aspirations and their suppression have been a major disruptor of international relations in the last decade. Many authoritarian governments consider democracy a hard foreign policy issue too. This is why they work actively and in coordinated fashion to undermine it abroad.

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To anchor the question of democracy at the core of foreign policy, the conversation has to go far beyond funding projects. It requires looking at all the nooks and crannies of foreign relations: high-level talks and official dialogues, trade and investment, economic sanctions, multilateral fora, cultural cooperation, and military and security support.

Foreign ministries and other policy actors in democracies should review their organizational structures and policies to makes sure that democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are wired into foreign policy decision-making, rather than relegated to the secondary question of project funding.

## The Battle of Narratives

In many countries, especially in Europe, the weakest link of democracy is the element of the right wing that has partly radicalized into an anti-democratic force. Authoritarian actors try to fuel such radicalization. The Kremlin and others, including inside the EU the likes of Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, want to change the conversation. They are well aware that democratic deliberation, public participation, transparency, and free and fair elections are their Achilles' heel, so they talk about something else. They talk about the opposition of traditional-conservative versus progressive-liberal policies, painting this as a struggle of civilizational proportions. Their logic is

simple: Who cares about the details of democracy if you are in a civilizational struggle? Who cares about corruption if the soul of the nation is under threat?

Wherever you go these days, authoritarian projects are tied to social-conservative agendas. In the most obvious case, the constitutional amendments President Vladimir Putin introduced to be able to rule with no end included a ban on gay marriage.

Many democratic actors have walked into this reframing trap by focusing their criticism of authoritarians on socially illiberal policies. (Economic illiberalism is usually not criticized.) To defeat authoritarian reframing, they need to stress that democracy is open to conservatives and liberals alike (a crude differentiation at any rate). They need to stress that democratic rules should have primacy precisely because they mediate the struggles and different opinions and interests about value preferences of religion, social norms, or economic approaches.

By definition, a pluralist democracy gives leeway for majorities to make decisions on these value preferences within the confines of human rights and the rule of law. If democracies reinforce the dichotomy that democracy stands for progressive liberalism and authoritarian regimes for conservative values, they will play the game according to the rules of their adversaries and keep losing the battle of narratives.

Furthermore, the trio of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law must be kept together, as it is already anchored in international law. Internally the EU has made the mistake of focusing mainly on the rule of law as this appeared less political and more technical. In light of the uninterrupted autocratization of Hungary and Poland, that mistake should be rectified and not repeated elsewhere.

## Use Comparative Advantages

Democracies should keep in mind that they are strong because they are more credible than autocracies, not least due to the fact that their public debate is more free and open. One may not like how democracy has been working in the United States, but the reason one could know about this is the country's free media. We can have a relatively accurate view of countries with free media. By contrast, China is the opposite with its highly controlled public sphere. The coronavirus broke out in a Chinese city of eight million but for weeks the world had no idea about it because media were not allowed to report. Democracies should rely on their comparative advantage in credibility and use it as a soft-power resource that enables a more vocal and bold public diplomacy.

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Credibility also means that democracies should not overdo rhetorical statements about their commitments to democracy abroad when these are limited or absent. For example, Saudi Arabia is at the bottom of any league table of freedom, yet most democracies have close relations and significant trade with it. Instead of pretending to have a commitment to democracy in the country, which everybody knows is not the case, democracies should better explain their reasons for close relations despite the nature of the Saudi regime, while reviewing whether those reasons really hold up.

Most importantly, democracies must stop self-censoring out of fear of offending autocracies. It may be understandable that international agreements do not mention democracy due to objections from authoritarian governments—as was the case, for example, with Sustainable Development Goal 16, which talks about inclusive and accountable institutions instead of democracy. Elsewhere, though, democracies should not shy away from openly addressing the issue of democracy in their official documents. For example, that Germany's new 70-page Indo-Pacific Strategy does not mention democracy and only speaks about

human rights and rule of law leaves the impression that the authors self-censored in order not to upset autocratic regimes.[5]

## Drop "Democracy Promotion," Update Democracy Support

During the past 15 years, the concept of democracy promotion has heavily suffered from the perception that it is associated with neoconservative U.S. foreign policy and the disaster of the Iraq invasion. It became linked with regime change and military intervention. To this day it is described by its detractors as a mere tool of other foreign-policy objectives.

These perceptions need to be broken. For a start, the word "promotion" should be avoided to mark a difference and to avoid the overtones of advertising linked to the word. Instead, the more neutral "support" should be used.

Supporting democracy means to be on the side of people who stand up for their right to participate in politics through elections and other means against governments that ignore and violate domestic and international obligations that they undertook to respect such political rights. It means supporting democratic processes and institutions that allow genuine political competition. It does not mean exporting specific institutional models or inciting revolutions. In short, democracy cannot be exported but it can be supported by all legitimate and peaceful means in the foreign policy toolbox.

Redefining democracy support also means a moving away from the assumption that it is a matter of "the West for the rest." Success stories of democracy are spread across the world.

## Multilateralism and Internal Governance

There is much talk of multilateralism as a core principle of foreign policy. Certainly, many global problems can only be solved through "coordinating relations on the basis of certain principles," as John Ruggie defined multilateralism.[6] At the same time, it is impossible to discuss cooperation among states without a focus on their internal governance, because this informs the principles of cooperation.

At the heart of the future of multilateralism is the problematic fact that authoritarian regimes often act as disruptors but global problems such climate change make cooperation with them unavoidable.

At first, an intuitive answer appears to be obvious: democracies have to cooperate with autocracies where it is possible on an ideology-free basis but they should prefer cooperation among themselves where the involvement of autocracies may hamper the goal of the cooperation. The problem is that such a delineation is difficult.

Multilateral cooperation between democracies and autocracies has been crumbling even in areas where it worked in the Cold War, like in the Conference on (now Organization for) Security and Co-operation in Europe. The Soviet Union in its later decades mostly acted as a stabilizing power under conditions of the bipolar order. Today authoritarian powers do not play that role. China aspires to a different global order while Russia's foreign policy aims at the violent restoration of its former power status and diverts citizens' attention from internal problems. China's debt-trap diplomacy or Russia's weaponizing of energy supply underline that even the most practical forms of economic cooperation can be used in disruptive manners. In recent years, the notion that autocracies would "change through trade"—West Germany's Cold War *Wandel durch Handel* policy toward the communist East—has started to work in the opposite direction. China appears to change its Western partners more through trade than viceversa.

Democracies should respond in four ways to those challenges.

First, they should cooperate systematically and pool their norm-setting efforts in multilateral formats they establish. New initiatives such as the D10 or the

5 Federal Government of Germany, "Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific," 2020.

6 John Gerard Ruggie, "Multilateralism: the Anatomy of an Institution," International Organization, 46:3, 1992.

Alliance for Multilateralism may be useful to forge a global alliance of "watchful democracies," although the substance of cooperation in such formats remains crucial. In policy fields that may have an impact on their domestic stability—such as be cybersecurity, data protection, the regulation of social media platforms, investor screening in sensitive sectors—democracies have to strive for common norm-setting to avoid becoming norm-takers in a world potentially dominated by international institutions centered around autocracies.

Second, they should foster democratic multilateralism by offering privileged cooperation and preferential treatment to emerging democracies as a form of democracy dividend and include them in systematic cooperation and other forms of support.

Third, they should defend or strengthen principles that reflect democratic values in existing multilateral institutions where these are challenged.

Fourth, they should engage multilaterally on significant global challenges with all states, while remaining realistic about the interests of all parties. There are few if any issues that will not be shaped by the differing interests and worldviews of authoritarian and democratic leaders. However, there is no alternative to seeking systematic cooperation on issues like global warming, poverty, or pandemic prevention. As U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan noted in 2019, any response "needs to be global, bringing the U.S. together with its rivals—including China—to face shared challenges" as "none of [these threats] can be effectively confronted by the United States alone."[7] That is true for any other power too.

## Avoid a New Cold War, but Not at All Costs

Privileged and closer cooperation among democracies could be seen as starting a new Cold War with authoritarian powers. Such a development is not desirable since there are too many global challenges that require cooperation among states, whatever their form of government. The level of interconnectedness and interdependency between the two sides today is also incomparable to what it was during the Cold War.

However, the question is whether a new Cold War has not already begun. China and Russia have been moving to Cold War-style rhetoric and tactics; for example, by running disinformation campaigns in social media in many democracies. In its neighborhood and in the Mediterranean Russia has already escalated to hot warfare, something that most democracies have treated as only a nuisance. And, because authoritarian powers become emboldened when they are not called out, it is also possible slip into a new Cold War by democracies pretending this is not happening.

Therefore, democracies should draw a much clearer red line. Any foreign government that engages in systematic campaigns to undermine their political systems should be threatened with significant deterioration of relations. It should be inconceivable for democracies to trade extensively with Russia when the Kremlin uses the profits to attack them from within.

However, there is also a need for distinction. The logic of the Cold War was containment of the adversary at all costs. In contrast, the logic of democracy support is the protection of existing democracies and backing democratic trends where they emerge. It does not mean actively instigating revolutionary movements. Only citizens of a country can make the choice of revolution.

## The Democracy Summit Is Not the Thing

There remain many unanswered questions at this point as to what the Biden administration wants to achieve by convening a summit for democracy. What would be its purpose beyond highlighting a central part of its agenda for the United States? Would it be any sort of starting point for new institutional arrangements of democracies? Should it be compared to other initiatives, like the Community of Democracies, that in fact sometimes include some non-democracies and do not leave a significant mark on international relations? How will the White House make the hard choices of whom to invite and whom to leave out?

7 Jake Sullivan, "What Donald Trump and Dick Cheney Got Wrong About America," The Atlantic, January/February 2019.

In light of all the points raised above, the summit should be de-emphasized. This is not only so as to manage expectations but also because the main question is how to rethink democracy in foreign policy in order to strengthen it.

The outlook on democracy support has drastically changed. Characterized by huge optimism after 1989, the conversation has become bleak. Democracy is in retreat and under pressure in numerous countries, and there have not been many successful transitions toward democracy in the last years. Democracy support needs to take better account of that reality. In the words of Thomas Carothers, there is a lack of a "theory of change" to defend and bolster democracy when it is under pressure.[8]

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At the same time, the wave of lament risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. An idea does not look attractive when its proponents only discuss it in morose tone. Democracy is a positive idea. The world moves in unexpected ways, but for over 200 years there has been a constant—the democratic aspirations of peoples have never stopped. They are often crushed but just as often they succeed. The power of the democratic idea remains formidable, and we should not build our strategies and rhetoric that democracy is on an unstoppable downhill trajectory.

When it does take place, Biden's summit for democracy will be important to signal policy change, but it will not be the policy itself. The real work cannot be done at the summit, but at the policy and institutional levels. It must involve the development of new strategic directions and a review of democracies' foreign policy machinery. In short, now is the time for working in the engine room rather than in the conference room.

8 Thomas Carothers, talk at the Berlin Democracy Conference, December 17, 2019.

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