

Is a League of Democracies a Good Idea?

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SUMMARY

- Although the idea of a “League of Democracies” usefully reflects the urgent need to rebuild the legitimacy of U.S. democracy promotion, it is a problematic idea.
- It rests on the false assumption that democracies share sufficient common interests to work effectively together in a large group on a wide range of global issues.
- Such a league could aggravate rather than alleviate global sensitivities about the close association between U.S. democracy promotion and the U.S. global security agenda.
- The next U.S. president should opt instead for more flexible, case-by-case partnerships to fit specific issues and contexts.

As the U.S. foreign policy community begins thinking seriously about a post-Bush foreign policy, one major issue on the agenda is how to get democracy promotion back on a better footing. Despite his intention to strengthen U.S. support for democracy abroad, President George W. Bush has badly damaged the credibility of the United States as a prodemocratic actor in the world and weakened the legitimacy of the very concept of democracy promotion. He has done so by closely intermixing his “global freedom agenda” with a war on terrorism that has included invading Iraq, exerting pressure for regime change on governments unfriendly to U.S. security interests, tightening ties with useful autocratic allies such as Pakistan’s president Pervez Musharraf, abusing prisoners at U.S.-run detention facilities, and abridging civil liberties at home. Regaining credibility in the democracy domain will be one part of the broader tasks of

regaining wider international support for an active U.S. leadership role in global affairs.

An important proposal relating both to democracy promotion and to U.S. foreign policy overall is that of establishing a League of Democracies or, as some call it, a Concert of Democracies. Influential experts on both sides of the political aisle—including Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, Robert Kagan, and others—have advanced this idea in recent years. This spring the idea has jumped from the pages of policy journals and reports to the larger canvas of the presidential campaign—Senator John McCain has taken it up, making a League of Democracies a linchpin of his proposed foreign policy.

As articulated by some, such as Ikenberry and Slaughter, such a league would focus on maintaining peace. It would be a group of like-minded countries that would pledge not



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to use force against one another and from which the United States would seek approval for military interventions. Others, however, notably Senator McCain, have put forward a much ampler conception. In Senator McCain's vision, the league would be a "global compact" that would "harness the vast influence of the more than 100 democratic nations around the world to advance our values and defend our shared interests." Establishing the league would help "revive the democratic solidarity that united the West during the Cold War."

In pursuit of this broader mandate, a League of Democracies would serve to advance democracy by bringing pressure to bear on autocratic regimes and supporting struggling democratic ones. It would also contribute to solutions on a wide range of other issues. Senator McCain talks of a league imposing sanctions on Iran, relieving suffering in Darfur, tackling HIV/AIDS and environmental crises, and providing market access to members.

These calls for a League (or Concert) of Democracies with a capacious global mandate are rooted in the valuable recognition that rebuilding U.S. credibility abroad requires listening to others, taking partnership seriously, and abandoning the unilateralist impulse. They embody an admirably positive, inclusive spirit about U.S. foreign policy, a welcome change from the recent past. And they represent the most elaborated proposal any presidential candidate has put forward on how to relaunch U.S. democracy promotion. Viewed from the perspective of recent trends concerning democracy in the world, however, the idea of a League of Democracies is seriously problematic. It rests on assumptions about the interests and outlooks of democracies that, although appealing and partly valid, are mistaken in significant ways. Moreover, pursuing a League of Democracies goes against what much of the world is looking for from a post-Bush United States on the issues of democracy promotion and global security.

Democracies' Diverse Interests

The core flaw in the thinking behind a League of Democracies is the notion that democracies all around the world, by virtue of being democracies, substantially share interests on multiple fronts and can work effectively together in a large group on that basis. Democracies, like all countries, base their foreign policies on multiple elements of their identity, not just the character of their political system but their regional identity, their religious and ethnic makeup, their economic position, their historical tradition, and much more. The notion that a democracy's foreign policy will be primarily defined on a wide range of issues by its status as a democracy is a misleading and possibly dangerous form of foreign policy reductionism.

The United States does get along better on average with democracies than with nondemocracies owing to a greater commonality of values. Yet this compatibility is only on average. The United States gets along rather poorly with some democracies. Argentina is one current example—relations between the Kirchner government and Washington are close to poisonous. As democracy spread in the world during the 1980s and 1990s, the United States enjoyed a fortunate run—remarkably few new democracies elected governments hostile to the United States. In this decade that run has skidded to a halt. A growing number of legitimate elections in the world are producing governments or strengthening political actors that the U.S. government deeply distrusts, whether in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Lebanon, Nepal, Nicaragua, Palestine, or Pakistan (where Nawaz Sharif and his political party were strengthened in the recent legislative elections). Moreover, the United States gets along reasonably well and in some cases quite well with many autocracies, including, for example, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Tunisia, Uganda, the United Arab Emirates, and Vietnam. Such relationships may not be held together by common democratic values, but they rest on

enough other shared interests to be close and in some cases quite long lasting.

Even in the warm relationships that the United States maintains with some fellow democracies, significant limits exist with regard to shared interests. Proponents of a League of Democracies tend to skip over this fact in their hurry to wax enthusiastic about the power of common bonds of democracy. Many developing-country democracies, for example, do not share U.S. positions on international trade, a domain where the clearest line is not that between democracies and nondemocracies but between North and South. Yet Daalder and Lindsay strangely claim that common membership in a League of Democracies would make major developing countries such as Brazil and India join up with the United States to constitute “a powerful voting bloc within the World Trade Organization.” They overlook not just the divergent interests but the fact that the democratic nature of such governments actually helps ensure that these governments will differ sharply with the U.S. line. Being democratic, they take into account in their policy making the economic interests of their citizens, interests that differ from the interests of U.S. citizens.

The limits of shared interests among democracies are evident not just in the economic arena but also on security matters. U.S. views about the primacy as well as the causes of the terrorist threat from Islamist radicals are sharply disputed in many democratic countries. U.S. policies toward the Muslim world have produced extraordinarily high levels of anti-Americanism not just in Arab autocracies but also in the Muslim world’s two most important democracies, Indonesia and Turkey. Senator McCain continues to underline what he believes is the fundamental validity and importance of the Iraq intervention. How would he reconcile his views on Iraq with the almost certainly contrary views of the majority of members of a League of Democracies? Would he, as he promises, “respect the will” of such a league?

More generally, many democratic societies harbor deep skepticism about the expansive global leadership role in which many U.S. foreign-policy experts and officials—including the proponents of a League of Democracies—instinctively believe. This is especially true in Latin America, Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia with regard to U.S. interventionism and the common U.S. assumption that future U.S.-led military interventions in one place or another are bound to be necessary in the decades ahead. Assuming that a League of Democracies would somehow provide the needed broad-based agreement to legitimate such interventions rests on a considerable amount of wishful thinking.

The proposals for a League of Democracies reflect a useful recognition of the need to rebuild the credibility of U.S. democracy promotion and foreign policy.

Faced with the realities of these divergent interests among democracies, the United States would have two choices—neither salutary—in trying to form or stimulate the creation of a league capable of acting on major security issues. It could limit the membership of the league to a relatively narrow set of countries with which it enjoys close security ties and exclude some equally democratic but less friendly countries. Such an approach would vitiate the very concept of the league, reducing it in the world’s eyes from a League of Democracies to a League of Democracies Favored by the United States. Or it could accept a broad membership of all true democracies (assuming a workable definition could be agreed upon, which is hardly a given). In such a league, the United States would either have to respect a collective will that rejects some key U.S. security initiatives and objectives or disrespect that will, thereby reducing the league to a hollow shell.

U.S. political, security, and economic policies should certainly seek productive partnerships, associations, alliances, agreements,

and other cooperative methods and forms. Yet such arrangements will best serve U.S. interests if they are flexible, varied initiatives crafted to realistically correspond with specific configurations of interests and issues instead of a cumbersome, overarching new institution based on an assumption of shared interests that is belied by experience.

False Hope for Assertiveness

The potential problems a League of Democracies would face in trying to act in unison on a wide range of global policy issues are manifest. What about in the more limited realm of democracy promotion, where the common interests of an association of democracies might be stronger? Proponents of a league be-

soft measures emphasizing cooperative assistance and positive incentives. With very few exceptions, democracy promotion occupies only a minor place in these countries' overall foreign policies and is frequently overshadowed by other interests.

Most of the major wealthy, established democracies, such as Germany, Japan, and France, are deeply reluctant to push autocratic governments hard on their democratic deficiencies. Europe's effort to frame a policy to encourage positive political change in Middle East autocracies—the Barcelona Process—has for more than ten years been a study in toothlessness. Many Europeans were greatly uncomfortable with what they perceived as aggressive U.S. efforts to support “color revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and elsewhere. Senator McCain talks of kicking Russia out of the G8 as punishment for its authoritarian slide. Yet he would be very unlikely to find support for such an initiative from most or all of America's closest democratic allies, which greatly prefer mild-mannered, often indirect approaches to problems of growing authoritarianism.

This outlook is equally or even more present among developing-country democracies. Thus, for example, it may be appealing to talk, as Senator McCain has, of the League of Democracies unifying to assert “concerted” pressure on Zimbabwe. In fact, South Africa, a country routinely mentioned as a valuable potential member of a league, has persistently resisted calls from the United States and Great Britain to join them in being tougher on Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe. Similarly, Senator McCain says that he will give Latin American nations “a strong voice in the League of Democracies” although at the same time he has committed his future administration to a hard-edged effort to “marginalize” President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela. Few Latin American nations have shown any appetite in the existing regional forums to join the United States in its anti-Chávez policies. Would McCain as president listen to their voices in a league?

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lieve that by binding together a broad association of democracies the United States would be able to mobilize wide support for an assertive approach to supporting democracy. It is true that during the past 20 years more and more democracies have become engaged in democracy promotion. During the second half of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, many European countries built up democracy support programs and policies, with emphasis on central Europe and the Baltic states and attention to parts of the developing world and the former Soviet Union as well. Australia and Canada became active democracy promoters. In this decade, the central European countries have evolved from recipients to providers of democracy aid, and a handful of developing countries, such as India and Chile, have done so as well. The multiplication of national governments engaged in democracy promotion has not, however, led to much greater assertiveness—most countries stick to relatively

The United States would very likely be unable to garner league support for the sort of activist, assertive approach to democracy promotion that Senator McCain and other league proponents advocate. Seeking more and deeper partnerships with fellow democracies on democracy programs and policies is advisable for various reasons. Yet, because of the heterogeneity of approaches and outlooks in this arena, it is better to pursue such partnerships on a flexible, opportunity-driven basis than to encase the domain in an institution almost inevitably prone to a lowest-common-denominator approach.

Sobering Lessons From the Community

The experience of the Community of Democracies is telling with respect to the prospects of a league. Founded in 2000 as a result of considerable diplomatic elbow grease on the part of the Clinton administration, especially by the then secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, the Community of Democracies is the existing institution most similar to the proposed League of Democracies. The community's *raison d'être* is to support democracy around the world—a narrower and thus potentially more manageable mandate than what is proposed for the league. Yet, after eight years of existence, including four ministerial conferences, scores of consultative and working group meetings, and countless hours of diplomatic palaver, the community has accomplished little. It has made a total of one statement criticizing a government for falling short on democracy (a short 2003 statement on Burma). And that solitary high-water mark was only a statement, not an action of any real substance or weight.

So great has been the unwillingness of most members of the Community of Democracies to push hard against other governments that, out of a reluctance to setting a too interventionist precedent, the community has refrained even from issuing any *positive* statements praising governments that take prodemocratic steps.

More generally, wariness about strengthening an institution widely seen as created and driven by the United States remains high among many democracies, even though they go through the motions of belonging to the Community of Democracies out of a disinclination to offend the U.S. government about an initiative it continues to push.

Daalder and Lindsay try to distinguish the sorry record of the community from that of a

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prospective league by arguing that the community is compromised by a too inclusive membership policy that has admitted some nondemocratic countries, such as Jordan and Morocco, as well as some merely formal or in some cases illiberal democracies. They argue that if a league were constituted only of true democracies, the shared interests on a wide range of key issues would be high enough that the league's members could accomplish "close coordination of diplomatic strategy, law enforcement activity, intelligence collection and analysis, and military deployments."

It is true that the presence in the ranks of the Community of Democracies of a number of countries that are not democratic or only formally democratic has damaged the community's credibility. But it is not their presence that has led to so little assertiveness and action on behalf of democracy. The high regard for national sovereignty and reluctance to push are widely shared among most of the community's members, including Brazil, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, Mozambique, South Africa, and South Korea, among many others.

Furthermore, the notion that the weakness of shared interests between the United States and some democracies is merely because those countries are formalistic or illiberal democracies

An Emerging Idea

“The United States should work with its friends and allies to develop a global ‘Concert of Democracies’—a new institution designed to strengthen security cooperation among the world’s liberal democracies. This Concert would institutionalize and ratify ‘the democratic peace.’”

—G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Forging a World of Liberty under Law: U.S. National Security in the 21st Century,” Princeton University Project on National Security, September 27, 2006.

“We need institutions that bring together the most capable states that share common interests and perspectives on the dangers confronting us. A Concert of Democracies, which brings together the world’s established democracies into a single institution dedicated to joint action, fits that bill.”

—Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, “Democracies of the World, Unite,” *The American Interest*, January/February 2007.

“Some of us have been wondering when thinkers such as Marshall, Acheson and Schuman would emerge. This proposal for a Concert of Democracies emphatically qualifies for consideration as the first 21st-century entry in that category of strategic thinking.”

—Gary Hart, *The American Interest*, January/February 2007.

“The United States should pursue policies designed both to promote democracy and to strengthen cooperation among the democracies. It should join with other democracies to erect new international institutions that both reflect and enhance their shared principles and goals. One possibility might be to establish a global concert or league of democratic states, perhaps informally at first but with the aim of holding regular meetings and consultations on the issues of the day.

—Robert Kagan, “End of Dreams, Return of History,” *Policy Review*, August & September 2007.

“We should go further by linking democratic nations in one common organization: a worldwide League of Democracies. This would be unlike Woodrow Wilson’s doomed plan for the universal-membership League of Nations. Instead, it would be similar to what Theodore Roosevelt envisioned: like-minded nations working together for peace and liberty.”

—Senator John McCain, “An Enduring Peace Built on Freedom,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2007.

is a serious fallacy. Although they are far from perfect as democracies (no country is perfect), Argentina and Ecuador, for example, are functioning democracies, yet they would be unlikely to be interested in either coordinating their diplomatic strategies and their intelligence collection or otherwise closely getting in step with Washington. The same is true with many other legitimate democracies. The tendency of some democracy enthusiasts to believe that if a country resists closely aligning with the U.S. global security posture it must not be a true democracy reflects a troubling politicization of the concept of democracy itself.

Matching the Tenor of the Times

The proposals for a League of Democracies reflect a useful recognition of the need to rebuild the credibility of U.S. democracy promotion and of U.S. foreign policy generally. Yet trying to relaunch U.S. democracy promotion by elevating U.S. prodemocracy rhetoric all over again and closely tying democracy promotion to U.S. global power goes against the tenor of the current international climate. The Bush line on a “global freedom agenda” unfortunately caused people all over the world to distrust and dismiss democracy promotion as a rhetorical cover for the projection of U.S. power, a projection they believe often contravenes democracy and employs objectionable methods.

Overcoming this deep, wide suspicion of democracy promotion will require easing up on, not redoubling, the close association between democracy promotion and the U.S. global security agenda. A new administration must help foster the idea that promoting democracy is about broader values and principles than just U.S. national self-interest and also that promoting democracy starts with practicing what you preach. This is best pursued through a series of quiet confidence-building measures, not a grand initiative wrapped in high-octane ideological rhetoric. Initial steps in this direction should include the following:

- Making clear that the United States does not intend to use military force or other means to overthrow governments in the name of democracy.
- Repairing the standing of the United States as a symbol of democracy by reversing those policies that produce U.S. abuses of the rule of law and of basic civil liberties at home and abroad.
- Showing that the United States is serious about pushing not just hostile autocrats but also some of its autocratic allies with which it has real influence, like Pakistan and Egypt, to take serious steps toward greater political openness and democratic reform.
- Demonstrating a commitment to working on a true partnership basis and to strengthening existing multilateral institutions that deal in different ways with democracy issues, such as the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.
- Bringing U.S. prodemocracy rhetoric into line with the realities of a long-standing U.S. policy framework that is substantially realist in practice, in which democracy is one of various major competing interests, sometimes consistent and sometimes in conflict with the others.

The idea for a League of Democracies also reflects a valid concern with the fact that the overall state of democracy in the world is troubled and that alternative power centers with an authoritarian character are gaining in strength. The best way to respond to this new context and to rebuild the legitimacy of the United States as a global actor is not to circle the ideological wagons. Instead it is to make the United States a better global citizen on numerous fronts and get the country's own economic and political houses in order.

Many countries in the world, including many democracies, welcome the growing plurality of global power. They are developing their own productive relations with the differ-

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ent power centers in the world and would be reluctant to sign on to an ideologically defined league that seeks to band them together with just one of those power centers. As debates over the shape of post-Bush foreign policy heat up, one certainly hears growing calls for a League or a Concert of Democracies emanating from the United States. Notably absent, however, are calls for such an institution from other countries, including America's closest democratic friends and allies. ■

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RESOURCES

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U.S. Democracy Promotion During and After Bush, Thomas Carothers (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007) <www.carnegieendowment.org/files/democracy_promotion_after_bush_final.pdf>.

The Return of History and the End of Dreams, Robert Kagan (Knopf, 2008).

The Backlash Against Democracy Promotion, Thomas Carothers (*Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2006).

Democracy Promotion in the Middle East: Restoring Credibility, Marina Ottaway (Policy Brief 60, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008).

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