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The League of Democracies

A “League of Justice” or an “Unholy Alliance”?

by Rolf Mützenich, Member of the German Parliament

— Independent of whether the next U.S. president will be John McCain or Barack Obama, Europe should prepare itself for a re-orientation of U.S. foreign policy; a foreign policy which will increasingly call upon the participation of its closest democratic allies. In a recent article, Republican presidential nominee John McCain proposed founding a “League of Democracies”. According to McCain, this organization would not be designed to replace but instead to support the United Nations by becoming engaged when the UN fails to achieve results. Thereby, McCain reengages a debate that has defined U.S. foreign policy since the time of Woodrow Wilson and the U.S. entry into World War I in 1917: *“making the world safer for democracies”*. This type of sentiment has pervaded U.S. foreign policy throughout the country’s history.

After World War II, this strategy was supplemented with the concept of containment of the Soviet Union and its satellite states. This strategy often had negative effects on democratization efforts since the U.S. was not very picky in terms of who it chose to engage in alliances with during the time of the Cold War. According to the principle “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”, dictatorships and even the Taliban in Afghanistan received U.S. support as long as they were anti-communist in ideology.



In 1993, Bill Clinton's National Security Advisor Anthony Lake proposed a new strategy that would aim to support democratization efforts instead of continuing the Cold War strategy that supported the containment of communism. On September 27, 1993, Bill Clinton gave a groundbreaking speech in front of the UN General Assembly in which he outlined that the spread of democracy was also a strategy to achieve peace. According to Clinton, the U.S. was now to maximize its efforts to expand its sphere of influence around the world by promoting the expansion of free market democracies. The subsequent expansions of NATO and the EU followed this logic as well. However, the support for democratization efforts did not exclude „humanitarian interventions“, such as in Bosnia for example. Apart from claiming the existence of weapons of mass destruction, George W. Bush justified the invasion of Iraq with the argument that a wave of democracy would sweep the entire Middle East following the military invasion. This of course was an expectation that was not met.



Frank-Walter Steinmeier, German Foreign Minister

At the same time, the basic idea is a valid one. Not many theoretical and academic concepts have shaped politics. One concept that did achieve this distinction is the theory of democratic peace. This theory postulates that there exists a correlation between international peace and constitutional democracies (that is to say a republican constitution). This concept existed as early as Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Kant. In the 1970s, David Singer undertook a comprehensive project (in „The Correlates of War“) that examined causes for war as far back as 1816.

One of the rather unremarkable results of this exercise was the revelation that democracies are engaged in a large number of violent conflicts, but that these conflicts are not waged against other democracies (Ironically, one exception to this rule is the Revolutionary War fought between the U.S. and Great Britain). In other words, in a world that existed of nothing but democracies, conflict would still exist but would not be resolved through violence. It is, however, still necessary to better define what exactly a democracy is. For example, the transformation index of the Bertelsmann Foundation indicates that the quantity of democracies worldwide is rising steadily. However, this says little about the quality of these democracies. Among many fledgling democracies, there continue to exist many substantial shortcomings in the judicial system and civic engagement. Worldwide peace through the spread of democratic values is indeed a promising strategy. However, such a strategy has to be pursued not outside of but within the structure of the United Nations.

Signs for a foundation of a global alliance of democratic states already exist. Initiated by the U.S., a loosely bound „Alliance of Democratic States“ was founded in Warsaw in 2000. The alliance's goal is to spread democratic values

worldwide, to strengthen democratic institutions and processes, and to form „coalitions of democratic states“ within international institutions within the foreseeable future. The final statement was signed by over 100 states. An absolute majority of UN members signed the statement. In Seoul, in 2002, during a ministerial conference, an action plan was approved, which was subsequently evaluated during a follow-up conference in Chile. Germany is also a member of this loosely bound community of states. Its last meeting took place in November 2007 in Mali.

What is it that American politicians envision a „League of Democracies“ could achieve? A kind of global NATO organization that would include Brazil, New Zealand, Australia and Japan? A „coalition of the willing“ like the one that was formed during the conflict in Iraq or Afghanistan? Is the goal of the U.S. to strengthening or to weaken the UN and in particular the UN Security Council? Is this a strategy to isolate countries like Russia and China? The U.S.'s true intentions are in fact not difficult to discern. The U.S. increasingly perceives the UN, which was founded with a high degree of U.S. support, as a burden. Not only the U.S. government, but the U.S. Congress and the American public as well, hold a very skeptical view of the UN.

The U.S. does not want to be constrained by the inactive „talking box“ located on the East River, where dictatorships have the same voting power – at least formally – as the world's single remaining superpower. It is evident that the move towards founding a league of democracies does indeed pursue the goal to de-legitimize the UN. Furthermore, it would be costly if this alliance of democracies were to develop into an exclusive club that was to exclude other states from the decision-making process, which would create a two class global society. Security issues,



United Nations in New York

such as climate change, global development, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, arms control, etc., can not be addressed without the participation of other large states such as China and Russia.

The final responsibility for security and peace continues to lie with the UN Security Council. Powerful states, regional organizations, or a „coalition of the willing“, on the other hand, can not be granted the authority to decide on peace or war. They may only act if they are authorized to do so by the Security Council. This achievement should not be carelessly jeopardized. However, among all the criticism of such unilateral efforts, one should not forget that until the Briand Kellog Treaty of 1928, war was regarded as a perfectly legitimate means of interstate conflict.

To transfer the balance of power from national states to an international organization was the obvious conclusion drawn from the countless wars of the past. This conclusion remains the case even if this organization does at times exist merely on paper and can be very slow to act. To enhance the UN's efficiency, extensive reforms are necessary. This is a cumbersome undertaking that must include the participation of the UN Security Council members. Without the support of the world's most powerful states (led by the U.S.) the United Nations will merely be able to act on a sporadic basis. If the balance of power were to shift from the UN Security Council to a kind of „justice league“, the world would not be a safer place. Instead, despotism would take hold.

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