

## Relevance and Realities: Washington's Flirtation with a League of Democracies

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In the fall of 2003, six months after the United States broke with the United Nations Security Council and launched its invasion of Iraq, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan gloomily warned the world's leaders gathered before him that they had »come to a fork in the road.« An international order built on »rules to govern international behavior« and »a network of institutions, with the United Nations at its center« had been shaken to its foundations. Some saw an »Abyssinia moment,« recalling the »rigor mortis« of the League of Nations in the face of Axis ambitions in the 1930s.

Five years later, the sense of crisis has somewhat eased. George Bush's »Abyssinia« – the effort to convert Iraq into a US ally or client – has, even at home, discredited the project for a new American century that his national security team had worked so feverishly to realize. The Security Council machinery was cranked up to deliver patchwork responses to crises in Sudan, Lebanon, and Iran that America's reigning conservatives had to acknowledge they could not control or resolve with just an ally or two. The international order conceived in a rather different world by Franklin D. Roosevelt's generation has demonstrated its continuing relevance, to the dismay of its detractors.

But this represents a reprieve for the United Nations system, not a recommitment to it. Multiplying stresses between the Anglo-Americans and the Russians – on whose comity the UN security system still depends – are narrowing the range of crises on which Security Council members can agree on a common global interest and course of action. Among the morally minded in powerful Western countries, frustration is mounting with a system in which the rulers of developing countries or rival powers thwart their resolute sense of duty in defense of basic humanitarian values.

The campaign debate leading up to the potentially fateful 2008 presidential election in the United States – the first in more than half a century in which no sitting president or vice-president is on the ballot – has underscored this uncertainty. One presidential candidate has called for the

creation of a new international organization, a League of Democracies, to co-exist and perhaps compete with the United Nations. The other has declined to contest this proposal, while warily reaffirming obligations under the UN Charter.

Is the United States on the brink of embracing a new multilateralism based on shared domestic political systems, edging away from the frustrating universal-membership UN? Would a democracies-only multilateralism be more effective than the United Nations system in dealing with the economic, social, political, and security challenges of the twenty-first century? And would the intended partners for such a new alignment, both wealthy and economically struggling democracies, be willing to sign up?

## Democratic Prometheus

Proposals for a league (or »concert« or »alliance«) of democracies have steadily gained adherents in Washington policy salons in the twenty years since the concept was first advanced in a presidential campaign by Republican Pat Robertson, a Christian television evangelist with deep roots in conservative politics (his father was a segregationist Democratic senator from Virginia). Conservatives' intense antipathy to communism exceeded even their distaste for global institutions and international law, and Robertson's notion of an alliance of democracies to replace the United Nations seemed neatly to exorcise all three demons. A decade later, liberal interventionists woke up to the utility of a multilateral vehicle to legitimate armed intervention after the Kosovo conflict of 1999, in which Western countries warred against Serbia without Security Council authorization for their use of force.

Though increasingly unconcerned about legality, American liberal interventionists affirm the importance of »legitimacy« – and the truest test of legitimacy, as Ivo Daalder and James Steinberg have insisted, is whether »the governments involved are themselves legitimate by dint of having been elected« (»The Future of Preemption,« *The American Interest*, Winter 2006). The sense that elections are essential to political legitimacy not only provides moral justification for an all-democracies grouping; it underpins Washington's new vocation as the world's prime promoter of democracy.

Support for democracy has not always been Washington's priority. In the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration conspired to overthrow demo-

cratic governments that flirted with leftist economic programs – most famously in Iran and Guatemala – and pressed outraged European democracies to bring fascist-ruled Spain into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Johnson administration engineered the 1964 military coup in Brazil and later acquiesced in the colonels' »putsch« in Greece, a member of NATO. President Nixon took a strong personal interest in overthrowing Chilean democracy in 1970-73. Aside from the Kennedy parenthesis, democracy was expendable in the Cold War competition.

Yet the cynicism of Nixon-era statecraft galvanized a human rights movement that stepped into power after Jimmy Carter's election as president, and Carter's elevation of human rights to a guiding principle of America's international relations for the first time put significant pressure on military regimes to yield power in democratic elections. Despite withering conservative criticism during Carter's presidency, the new policy developed tenacious roots; Ronald Reagan put aside his own reservations about undermining loyal authoritarian allies to embrace democratization and supported a National Endowment for Democracy (inspired in part by western Germany's party-affiliated »Stiftungen«). The Asian »people power« revolutions of the 1980s, followed by the collapse of communist rule in the Soviet bloc and of apartheid in South Africa, created an extraordinary sense of democratic momentum. The UN General Assembly's 1990 approval, for the first time, of a permanent UN elections assistance unit to support democracy – proposed by the elder President Bush – signaled that a tipping point had been reached globally. Bill Clinton would pursue »democratic enlargement« as a top priority of post-Cold War America, and there was strikingly little resistance at the United Nations to the infiltration of democratization into UN peacekeeping operations and development programs. The world, it seemed, truly had been re-made.

By the late 1990s the United States, the world's self-styled sole surviving superpower, had become a global evangelist for democracy (linked, tellingly, to »free markets,« the gospel of laissez-faire economics in revival since Reagan's presidency). Its peerless power, military as well as economic, made it a formidable Prometheus of democracy. Despite the reservations of West European allies, the Clinton administration forged a new Community of Democracies to help sustain the global momentum for democratic governance. A convening group of self-designated countries (»self« referring to the US Department of State) chose the governments to invite, an unavoidable democratic deficit necessitated by most

democratic governments' tenuous commitment to the nascent entity's lack of concrete functions. The Community has become a forum for encouraging democratic institutions and for rallying democratic solidarity, though it has no power, no constitutive treaty, no secretariat, and no funding. Moreover, none of its invited participants (it has no members either) has sought to endow it with these things – Washington least of all.

The United States at the turn of the century was itself increasingly chafing at international organizations and the constraints of international law, which conservative policy circles were deriding as a web spun by Lilliputian developing countries and the French to tie down the benevolent American giant. And across the political spectrum, it was international constraints on the use of force – the sole surviving superpower's unique comparative advantage – that chafed the most.

Though for over a decade the UN Security Council had worked surprisingly well to forge a common security policy in response to crises, Kosovo triggered its rupture. The United States refused to brook the objections of a (democratic) Russia to military intervention and pushed NATO to threaten and then initiate an air war. Brushing aside Europeans' insistence that the Serb-Kosovan case was unique and no precedent for the future, the Washington policy community concurred that it was in fact a major precedent for the new century. In the face of exigent necessity – whether one of humanitarian crisis (for liberals) or national interest (for conservatives) – Prometheus should not be bound by the legalisms of the UN Charter. Not the Security Council alone, but either NATO operating out of area, or a larger association of like-minded democracies, or the United States acting alone could be equally valid ways of doing what might need to be done.

## **Bush League Democracy**

The ascent of George W. Bush in many ways accelerated trends that were already visible during the preceding »unipolar« decade. Though his administration's embrace of preventive military attack and its brusque contempt for international opinion, law, and institutions seemed a radical break from previous practice, the conservatives whom Reagan had brought into government had made these views mainstream in what seemed the country's increasingly dominant political party. Anxious to purge themselves of the charge of Carter-era »weakness« on national

security, many in the opposition party tacitly conceded the ideological point. The attacks that leveled the World Trade Center in 2001 swept aside all the constraints, both domestic and international, that might otherwise have inhibited a strenuously nationalist administration. A consequence was Bush's unusually blunt national security strategy premised on preemptive military strikes and coalitions of allies, with no role for the United Nations or thought for international law.

But Washington did not lose its faith in democracy, which it espoused with a militancy that perplexed traditional foreign policy realists at home and dismayed traditional allies abroad. Thanks to the invasion of Iraq, President Bush proclaimed, »freedom is on the march.« His administration redoubled its efforts at promoting pro-American democratic political movements in former Soviet republics, and he pressed Arab allies toward democratization. But the same administration reverted to old Cold-War habits in fomenting »coups d'état« against democratically elected leftist leaders in Venezuela and Haiti. It lost its enthusiasm for Arab democracy when many voters in Egypt and Palestine chose parliamentary candidates opposed to US policy in the Middle East. And Pakistan – where the administration's effort to keep an unpopular military strongman in power behind the veil of an elected pro-American prime minister collapsed ignominiously – brought Washington conservatives' trail of double standards on democracy to a decisive dead end.

Most strikingly, the stirring American crusade to promote democracy was almost totally divorced from the transnational movement to protect human rights, with its global networks and solid grounding in international law and institutions. Instead, Washington's promotion of democracy became associated with military force, covert operations to effect »regime change« against unfriendly governments, and expansion of America's far-flung network of military bases and alliances. Even the support for democratic enlargement by a reasonably internationalist Clinton administration had, for the sensibilities of critical Europeans such as France's Hubert Védrine, carried a whiff of hegemonic reach by an *hyperpuissance*. After its hijacking by the would-be architects of America's twenty-first century global dominance in the Bush administration, US democracy promotion has become tightly intertwined with narrow US security interests.

This is the context in which the presidential candidate of the incumbent US political party, John McCain, has proposed the creation of a League of Democracies.

## A Partial League – or League of Partiality

With some justice, Americans pride themselves on being the pioneers and protectors of democracy in the world. Greeks and Romans in Antiquity and Italian city-states in the Middle Ages had experimented with democratic governance, only to see it falter amid internecine conflicts or with the acquisition of empire. Americans created a democratic polity over a vast territory, extended in stages the reach of democratic rights to long-disfavored sectors of the population, and sustained democratic practice through the kinds of crises that had brought down other republican experiments. Americans' embrace of democratic freedoms as central to national identity would seem to make political leaders' embrace of democracy promotion politically safe—and questioning leaders' zeal for expanding democracy and »liberty« politically perilous. In fact, for much of Bush's presidency, critics to his left seemed more flummoxed by his having stolen »their« issue of democracy than critical of his pursuit of it.

The directors of a centrist project on national security that has garnered serious attention among US policy intellectuals were bold enough to raise doubts about the administration's fundamental premise. Significant dangers to peace and security arise from »hostile ideologies and belligerent nationalism,« John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter observed. »Democracy *per se* will not cure these dangers. On the contrary, recent research indicates that belligerent nationalism and religious extremism may thrive in emerging democracies and modernizing states« (»Forging a World of Liberty under Law,« Princeton Project Papers, 2006). Even so, they concluded that what is needed is »not simply an international order but a liberal international order.« A key stumbling block to the realization of a truly liberal order, they suggested, is a system that inhibits the Security Council from embracing armed intervention; they called for updating global rules governing the use of force, perhaps to include »authorizing the use of force retroactively in cases demanding immediate action or in which political stalemate has effectively blocked all action,« and – in a bold challenge to the stale Washington orthodoxy of the past quarter century – astutely proposing abolition of the five permanent members' veto in the Security Council.

At the same time, participants in their project proposed an »alternative body,« a Concert of Democracies, that »could become an alternative forum for the approval of the use of force in cases where the use of the veto

at the Security Council prevented free nations from keeping faith with the aims of the U.N. Charter.« There is no mistaking the intent of this »exclusive« and limited-membership organization (narrower even than the »shallow« existing Community of Democracies): to provide multilateral legitimation for military intervention that »free nations« would undertake consistent with their interpretation of the Charter's goals. Ikenberry and Slaughter give particular emphasis to the responsibility to protect.

There is an admirable straightforwardness in this vision of an alternative institution to supersede a United Nations that is either paralyzed by pacifist hand-wringing or deadlocked by the vetoes of non-free nations. Such directness is not always found in the promises of politicians. It is certainly not part of Senator John McCain's public rationale for his League of Democracies.

In unveiling in a major foreign-policy speech in March 2008 what would be a McCain administration's signature scheme for reshaping the global order, the Arizona senator described the proposed league as a vehicle to »combat HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, fashion better policies to confront environmental crises, [and] provide unimpeded market access to those who endorse economic and political freedom.« He made no mention of the use of military force. He elaborated on the league concept in a speech in May, where he predicted that it would apply »stiff diplomatic and economic pressure« to force an abusive government either to change its ways or to allow foreign forces onto its territory to maintain domestic tranquility. The new organization would, McCain added, use »the economic power and prestige of its member states to end other gross abuses of human rights such as the despicable crime of human trafficking.« Again, he made no mention of the use of force.

McCain's discreet silence about a League of Democracies giving approval and a patina of international legitimacy to the use of military force is striking, especially in a political leader who has championed America's purposeful use of military power and insisted on »victory« in locales as unpromising as Iraq. It seems to reflect the passing of the moment when the American public, incensed at the carnage of the World Trade Center attacks, was ready to follow its leaders into military operations abroad. As the Iraq war has dragged on into its sixth year, polling consistently finds the citizenry deeply skeptical of involvement in new military interventions. »Any military action is going to be really difficult,« acknowledges Republican pollster William McInturff – »even for humanitarian

reasons it'll be very difficult« (event transcript, »Reinventing American Global Leadership,« The Century Foundation, November 28, 2007). Senator McCain's advisors have evidently concluded – in contrast to politically naïve liberal interventionists – that discussion of the military purpose behind the proposed League is incompatible with victory where it counts most, at the ballot box this November.

The pious enumeration of peaceable causes – fighting AIDS, protecting the environment, opening markets – that the candidate says his League would serve is patently preposterous. It takes action by all countries, not just the virtuously democratic ones, to control diseases; the US government's Centers for Disease Control have to work with a Vietnam as much as an Indonesia to halt epidemics of avian flu or SARS. Europe and America cannot halt, much less reverse, global warming without China and Russia. And it is absurd to suggest that the United States is going to bar imports from China or Saudi Arabia, or welcome unrestricted imports of Brazilian sugar, because it wants to privilege democracies and penalize autocracies. A League of Democracies is no back-up at all to the World Health Organization; American conservatives themselves have been the most strident opponents of Kyoto Protocol-style emissions reductions unless communist China is included, and neither the market access rules and dispute settlement procedures of the World Trade Organization nor the labor rights overseen by the International Labor Organization can practically be applied only in countries with periodic competitive elections. A partial-membership League simply cannot address very effectively the wide range of issues that require cooperation and common action by a universal membership.

While its real purpose may need to be obscured in the heat of the presidential campaign, there should be no mistake: The League or Concert would be fundamentally aimed at addressing security challenges. Yet even on many dimensions of security, it is clear that a democratically partial membership would be inadequate, if not counterproductive. Pacts to prohibit and ferret out chemical or biological weapons would likely prove worthless if they were negotiated just among democracies; for decades the United States negotiated shared limits on nuclear weapons with the decidedly antidemocratic Soviet Union (and notably failed to negotiate such limits when conservatives' hostility to the »evil empire« burned most intensely among policymakers). When peacekeepers have been needed to stabilize a conflict in Congo or Sierra Leone or Lebanon, few would have been so fastidious as to reject troop contributions from military-ruled



Nigeria or Pakistan, coup-prone Bangladesh, royalist Jordan, or communist China.

Nor will coercive security measures short of military action, such as sanctions, likely prove effective if only the democratic half of the international community cares to apply them. If the problem with getting UN Security Council approval of an economic embargo on a Sudan or an Iran is Chinese resistance, it is difficult to see how sanctions adopted by a group that excludes China would have the desired coercive effect, if China and others were to expand their economic relations with the targeted country. There may be specialized areas where major Western countries can impose coordinated sanctions when the Security Council is divided – and occasionally do, without the need for a new international organization; but the Western monopoly on financial, petro-technical, and investment resources seems increasingly tattered.

The core motivation for a democracies league, clearly, lies in the desire to deal decisively and forcefully with political conflicts where the threat or use of armed force might arguably provide solutions, as liberal interventionists are frank enough to acknowledge – situations like those in Sudan, Burma, Zimbabwe, and Iran. It is about providing a multilateral authority – a fig leaf, perhaps – to legitimize interventions that Washington wishes to undertake when the sometimes contentious UN Security Council might balk. By excluding what are thought to be the most reflexively reluctant countries from the circle of decision-makers, the United States would have in a League of Democracies a membership more partial to its points of view.

Whether so partial an organization is a good thing for the countries that the League's advocates expect to conscript into membership – or is a good thing for Americans – is a debate that remains to be joined in the United States.

## **An Idea Whose Time Has Come – or Gone?**

Supporters of a League or Concert argue that the Security Council is too easily immobilized by countries with their own nefarious interests or corrupt political systems – especially such veto-wielding permanent members as China, Russia, and France. With even conservatives now realizing, after Iraq, that the United States pay a stiff price for unilateral military interventions, advocates suggest that an alternative forum could provide a

similar patina of legitimacy to the Security Council at a fraction of the political cost of unilateralism. A League of Democracies could get around China – and now Russia, as it regresses into authoritarian pseudo-democracy – though Washington would still face unpredictable torment from the French.

Here the Princeton project re-designers of the global architecture show a far more grounded sensibility than those among Washington's hard-line conservatives. Ikenberry and Slaughter propose their concert as a fallback if UN member states fail to adopt their desired reforms of the Security Council – most importantly, the elimination of the veto. For them, a Security Council unobstructed by vetoes obviates the need for a league. For the conservatives who since Pat Robertson's campaign have sustained the league of democracies dream on the right, the Security Council veto is sacrosanct, an indispensable guarantee of inviolable American sovereignty; and so long as the veto is the prerogative of not just one but all five permanent members, the Security Council is a fatally disabled tool of American power.

Moreover, the moral legitimacy that Daalder and Steinberg impute to democratically elected governments is an especially compelling concern for the American right (at least if those governments espouse free markets and ally themselves with America). So-called »movement conservatives« have long felt a keen moral revulsion against intercourse with immoral and inimical regimes; in previous generations they had, after all, successfully opposed the mere opening of diplomatic relations with the communist governments of Russia and China for 16 and 29 years after their respective ascents to power. The problem with the Security Council, and the United Nations in general, is that the membership includes so many reprobates that it is inherently morally discredited, a problem that a democratic league, or its NATO core membership, does not present (although Old Europe may still arouse suspicions).

But while American liberal interventionists may come to the league idea from a very different direction from conservative nationalists, for the rest of the world this distinction does not make much of a difference. A League of Democracies to backstop – or bypass – the United Nations is an idea that has, so far, won few advocates outside the United States. Democracies in the developing world are particularly outspoken, but even Washington's most dependable allies have been notably cool towards the idea: Britain's foreign secretary pointedly if politely rebuffed a question about it in a public discussion at the New York-based International Peace

Institute, noting dryly that Her Majesty's government supported reform of existing international institutions. The reasons for the chilly reception are not hard to understand.

1. *Developing country democracies are developing first and democracies second.* Both people and leaders in poor yet democratic countries tend to identify more with other poor countries, regardless of those countries' political regimes, than they do with wealthy democratic countries. With the shared historical experience that they commonly only wrest attention and resources from the powerful when they have leverage of their own – for which group solidarity is helpful – they have scant interest in facilitating armed interventions by Western countries in other developing countries' affairs, except in dire circumstances certified by trusted UN agencies like those in East Timor a decade ago or Darfur today. India, South Africa, Brazil, and Indonesia resist coercive measures as much as China does, and they can be as hard to persuade on imposing sanctions against a Burma or a Zimbabwe as the dourest party apparatchik in Beijing.

The discovery that developing country democracies treat even the advancement of human rights differently than the West has deeply disappointed some who had pressed hard for replacing the UN Human Rights Commission. The Council that replaced the Commission in 2006 is far more heavily tilted to democratically ruled countries than its predecessor, yet the Council has infuriated Americans by reflexively supporting Palestinians against Israeli occupation. Washington should be careful what it wishes for: If it could not persuade a majority of its NATO allies in 2003 to back its invasion of Iraq, how much harder would it have been to get such approval from an organization three times NATO's size that includes countries of such diverse perspectives as Chile, Ghana, and Indonesia?

2. *Democracies would still not be able to restrain the United States from inappropriate military action.* Democracies would have no more leverage in the proposed league to restrain Washington's hawkish impulses than they already have at the United Nations. For a proposed military action that has a potent constituency in Washington, would the United States desist if it could not get a majority in the League of Democracies to back it? If the bottom line is that the United States would still insist on a right to use military force for its own ends, when even the most pliant sub-group balks at its cause, there is little reason for other states to cooperate in what many of them would view as a multilateral charade.

3. *The democracies grouping would have little concrete function.* There is a certain irony in seeing conservatives champion the creation of yet another

international organization, especially since they feel obliged to promise that the new agency would complement, not supersede, the United Nations. But neither liberal interventionists nor conservative advocates of a league have outlined operational responsibilities for the proposed new body. Finance ministries and parliaments in countries being asked to join a new organization would surely be skeptical about coughing up funds to pay dues and deploy delegations for a new international bureaucracy of duplicative mandates and incoherent purposes. Given the US track record since 1981 of failing to pay assessments even for international peacekeeping operations the United States had proposed, reluctant invitees to the new democracies party might justifiably pass up the invitation out of worries that, in the end, Washington conservatives could again leave the allies holding the bag when their enthusiasm wanes.

On top of these weighty objections is an overarching one: Were such an entity to come into existence, asserting the power to marshal military measures by its members against miscreant non-member states, international law that constraints states' initiation of war would be seriously undermined. It is one thing if member states of organizations such as the African Union or NATO (or the defunct Warsaw Pact) agree to permit their organization to take armed action in the event of an internal governance crisis in one of them – which, tellingly, none has done. But it is quite a leap for a group of states to assert the right to launch military action against an outside state on their own say-so. The constraints that nations have ratified in international law on the use of force since the mid-twentieth century have slowly taken hold in the international community over the past eight decades: National self-defense against armed attack, collective action against threats or breaches of peace, all buttressed by international peacekeeping, monitoring, and judicial institutions.

The North Atlantic Treaty explicitly subjects the NATO alliance to international treaty law. The Treaty prescribes that members should act militarily in collective self-defense against an armed attack against any of them, under the authority of the UN Charter, and permits it to take military measures proactively when the Security Council exercises such authority. NATO's European members insist on adherence to this legal standard – and rightly fear that self-deputized posses run a serious risk of creating a Wild West of alliances spawning counter-alliances, and eroding a global legal standard that has had some success in containing the »scourge of war.« The experience of Europe's alternative experiments with triple alliances and ententes early in the last century, or with tri-

partite axes a few years later, might inspire caution about catastrophic failure.

Hints of such caution may be detected even in a brash America as the experience of more recent missteps sinks in. Liberal interventionists would like firewalls against conservatives plunging the country militarily into another Iraq. Conservatives value firewalls against liberals plunging the country militarily into another Somalia or into Darfur. There may have been a moment when the idea of a militarily proactive league of democracies – however »democracy« might be measured – may have passed muster with the American public. That moment seems to have passed.