

What is the future for global cooperation on democracy?

1. Introduction

This report is based on a Forum 2000 policy brief presentation on the future of global democratic cooperation, held under the framework of the Global Democracy Coalition's Partners for Democracy Day ahead of the second Summit for Democracy on March 29-30. Since last year's inaugural Summit, coordination between global democracies has entered into a challenging, new geopolitical context. Marked first and foremost by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, questions of how and with what focus to strengthen democratic standards—and whether this should involve a committed stance against Russian autocracy—have given rise to some tension, most prominently between western and non-western democracies. In view of these difficulties, the present discussion reflects on avenues for improvement: where have established coordination processes between global democracies borne fruit, and how should global democratic cooperation continue its development in the near future?

2. Discussion summary

2.1. War in Ukraine

The primary issue from which the discussion started out was the inter-democracy cleavage caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While the Summit for Democracy frames its mission around that conflict, there is disagreement about taking punitive measures against Russia, and uncertainty on committing to more ideological narratives in support of democracy—even within western democracies themselves. Maiko Ichihara noted that Russia's aggression as a result of Putin's autocracy has made it clear that a lack of transparency and accountability in governance could lead to domestic and international instability. At the same time, however, increased discourse around national security and resilience has proven difficult to reconcile with an idealised global democratic alliance.

2.2. Thematic cooperation

Considering these difficulties, it is unsurprising that coordination has primarily focused on smaller, operational themes. International cooperation has centred in the first Summit's 'cohorts', each of which tackles a specific issue (e.g. anti-corruption efforts, electoral integrity). While this allows engaged actors to form wide alliances and focus on practical, nitty-gritty issues, the discussants believe clearer indicators of success as well as more stringent follow-up is needed. In general, as of now, governments have made significant reform commitments without a framework for progress to be judged by. Even still, the cohorts have to some extent been productive, and coordination without reference to sensitive geopolitical issues is more inclusive, appealing to a broader array of countries: as Sook Jong Lee explained, less-democratised countries have an interest in fighting corruption not only to ensure democratisation, but to ensure economic development.

2.3. Civil society

All speakers agree that civil society must play an important role in bridging across today's tensions and strengthening the future of global democracy. The aforementioned intergovernmental cooperation on practical issues is legitimate, but sensitive political considerations cannot always be avoided. Civil society can address these, and it can do so too in places where democratic culture is mostly absent or under siege: shifting some way, in Richard Youngs' words, from "a cooperation between democracies to a cooperation between democrats" would connect human rights defenders and dissidents in a truly global fashion, and better confront processes of autocratisation. Businesses, too, have an important role—in Japan, they have recently worked together with government to create new guidelines for due diligence in supply chains, meant to extricate the domestic economy from participation in forced labour in Xinjiang or the export of surveillance technology.

2.4. Towards global cooperation

By moving to a multi-stakeholder approach, global cooperation narratives are less likely to fall prey to rivalling frames of international competition. Nonetheless, there remain concerns about inclusiveness. The bottom line, as Sook Jong Lee puts it, “is that we have to bring the Global South into this network by civil society organizations like Forum 2000” able to connect political leaders, officials, activists and journalists, alike. But civil society is not a panacea: organisations in Asia and elsewhere are often too poor to engage in global networks. Therefore, donors in Europe and the United States should provide help in connecting Global South civil society organisations and should aim to integrate their regional perspectives on issues. Simultaneously, the presence of African, Asian, and Latin-American civil society actors already engaged in networks should be boosted, as they remain relatively overshadowed by European and United States actors—even in their own regions. The development of the Summit for Democracy format to include regional conferences is laudable, but more coordination is needed between co-organising places, if democratic cooperation is to be a global effort.

3. Conclusions

Determining the appropriate course of future global democratic coordination requires careful reflection. In contrast to some western narratives in which opposition to Russian aggression forms the fundament for any such coordination, an approach which rather focuses on more widely-shared concerns may be more productive. At the end of the day, many people desire to maintain and strengthen freedom and human rights, and a strong civil society is unmissable in achieving cross-border cooperation. Finally, the proper implementation of each of these elements requires a less western-centred set of stakeholders, interests, and preoccupations to figure in global democracy networks. If people are to buy in to worldwide democratic cooperation, they need to be properly represented.

4. Recommendations

- Clearer indicators and more stringent follow-up on avowed government reforms, with both domestic and international feedback. Civil society has an important role in ensuring progress.
- More pronounced involvement of civil society in the general global democracy project, especially those from the Global South.
- Domestic profiles of the Summit for Democracy tend to be weak. It is imperative to enhance the conference’s political profile, both domestically and globally.
- Identify issues where democracies around the world share similar concerns. Climate change, for instance, makes it harder to sustain open politics everywhere, and constitutes a promising topic on which to nurture deliberative democratic culture.

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