

What is the future for global cooperation on democracy?



In March the second Summit for Democracy (S4D) will be held, as debates intensify about the place of international democracy support in the new geopolitical landscape. After overseeing two of these summits, the US may now step back from leading this embryonic process of coordination between global democracies. This raises questions about the future of the summit process and how strong democracies' political interest is in deepening cooperation. While the summit process has usefully kickstarted dialogue among democracies on a number of issues, it has not yet gained a clear and high-level political profile. This policy brief assesses the state of play in global democratic cooperation and suggests how it might be best developed after the second summit in March 2023. **The strategic need for democratic coordination remains strong but its form must be rethought if it is to endure and prove itself relevant to the challenges facing global democracy.**

Assessment of the S4D process

The summit process has attained some traction and ensured political engagement around democracy of over 100 countries at a time when geopolitical challenges have been acute and divisive. The March 2023 hybrid summit has once again attracted commitment from presidents and prime ministers to participate and strengthen support for democracy domestically and internationally.

The S4D process has moved beyond an original focus on the three themes of combatting authoritarianism, anti-corruption and protecting human rights. This has mainly been done thanks to the involvement of civil society actors, including through the Global Democracy Coalition. So-called 'cohorts' on seventeen specific themes have become the main substantive core of the process. These cohorts focus on improving international standards and dialogues on issues like media freedom, corruption, and anti-impunity measures.

The establishment of thematic cohorts has been an important achievement even if the functioning and results of these cohorts have varied greatly. Many of the cohorts count on strong civil society engagement, including those from countries whose governments have not participated in the summits. Several cohorts have gathered the participation of high-level political support – Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen for the launch of the youth cohort, Commissioner Dubravka Šuica for the launch of the deliberative democracy cohort. Some cohorts have indicated that they are planning to work beyond the second summit, like those on deliberative democracy and youth.

Results have varied across the cohorts. Some cohorts have limited their contribution to organizing conferences (like the electoral integrity cohort conference in Delhi), while others have organized thematic advocacy campaigns (like the tech for democracy cohort). The deliberative democracy cohort has drafted plans for the inclusion of citizens in the S4D process through the establishment of a global deliberative assembly, while youth cohort has drafted guidelines for young peoples' democracy participation. Most cohorts have analyzed the country commitments made by governments related to their topic.

Some cohorts have been truly international (like the youth cohort led by the EC, Ghana, Nepal and Costa Rica) while some cohorts have been more national (the anti-corruption cohort led by Moldova). In general, the government leading cohorts have come mainly from Europe, with relatively little representation from Asia or Africa. The lack of funding has prevented many civil society organizations from the South from participating.

While asking countries to make reform commitments has proven successful in other international initiatives – like the public administration issues covered by Open Government Partnership – in the S4D process the concrete follow up has been weak. **The commitments that governments made at the first summit don't have indicators and are difficult to measure over one year. They have not been mainstreamed in countries' national politics and awareness levels are low if they even exist.** There is no monitoring mechanism and self-reporting varies greatly amongst countries.

The US is co-hosting the second Summit for Democracy with the governments of Costa Rica, the Netherlands, Republic of Korea, and Republic of Zambia. This is being done through four regional Summits which create opportunities for new actors, including from regional civil society, to be involved in the Summit process. Still, these events have not been structured in a way that provides for much opportunity to share experiences beyond each region.

Coordination among co-hosts has presented challenges since each regional partner government has had to gain authorization for any plans from the White House and the State Department. The US has not given regional co-hosts room to decide on invitations, despite some co-hosts wanting to include more countries. For example, The Indo-Pacific regional summit, that the Korean government is cohosting, will involve the same 25 members that were invited to the first summit, despite an interest from Asian governments in inviting Thailand and Singapore.

Geopolitical change

Over a year since the first Summit, the new geopolitical context has altered the democracy support agenda in complex ways. On the one hand, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has raised the profile of democracy as a security issue. Also in 2022, the Chinese government's zero-COVID policy and its sudden shift in COVID countermeasures which led to a spike in infections, further highlighted the risks that result from autocratic governance.

International cooperation among Western and a small number of other democracies has revived, in defense of the liberal international order. Some, although not all, populists around the world have been losing support, especially in Europe. The US and European countries have been more forthright in their support for the freedom of the Ukrainian people than most expected would be the case. They increasingly pushback against the prospect of a military invasion of democratic Taiwan by autocratic China. Germany and Japan have made major changes in their security policies, and the US, Japan, and the Netherlands have decided to restrict the export of high-end semiconductors to China to prevent their use in advanced weapons.

Yet, as Western democracies draw closer together, the Global South seeks to avoid entrapment in great power rivalries. Most non-Western democracies have stressed that they do not think that the Russian war touches upon their security concerns. In part reflecting these divergences, the agenda of the second summit does not have a great deal to do with the fallout from the Ukraine war. The summit process has focused more on very generic democratic reform imperatives. It has become self-evident that there will not be a single or neat divide between democracies and autocracies – that was anyway predictable. Cooperation between democracies is one element of emerging geopolitical structures, alongside other quite different dynamics. The key lies in how these fit together. The strategic case for democratic coordination remains powerful, but realist-tilting economic and security ties with nondemocratic countries are deepening simultaneously.

The S4D cohorts risk becoming rather low key and technocratic, taking the focus away from high level geopolitical aspects of democratic coordination. The cohorts make no reference to serious attacks on democracy in specific countries – as very concrete deteriorations occur in places like Belarus, Hong Kong, Nicaragua, Tunisia. Rather than focus on generic themes almost in the abstract. Many democracy organizations, including Forum 2000, have begun to despair at the exclusion of tangible, high profile political dynamics from the S4D.

Shared leadership

On the basis of what has been achieved so far and the challenges of the geopolitical context, several issues will determine whether and how democratic coordination continues after the second summit. One of the most important will be to ensure that a wide range of democratic states feels more invested in steering a future process of democratic cooperation.

The best option would be to develop a model of shared leadership so as to extend the legitimacy of and buy-in to future democratic coordination. The US and European states have been most prominent in the process and unsurprisingly see it through the prism of the concerns arising from the war in Ukraine. Yet other democracies

around the world have other pressing priorities and any sustainable process of democratic coordination needs to reflect this wider set of perspectives. While this is often repeated as a mantra, concrete forms of new organizational templates are now needed to avoid another process being dominated by the same actors.

Some states are arguing that functional cooperation should continue through modified cohorts but without a single, overarching political process. However, having a high-level political process would still be valuable to give strategic direction to the multiple areas of function cooperation. **The crucial issue will be to ensure that a wide range of democratic states feel ownership in steering this political process if it is to meet its main objective of globalizing the ethos of democracy support.**

The four regional summits are a step towards shared leadership. The next step should be to build greater inclusion and spread ownership of democratic coordination. Continuation of the same formal S4D process that currently exists is less important than finding new ways of ensuring co-created democratic agendas between a larger number of countries and stakeholders.

One idea, reflecting a spirit of choice and consensus, would be for attendees in each of the regional meetings to vote for one country from that region to take the leadership mantle for a year. Then, the governments elected from each region would participate in a group that would oversee activities for one year. A new group would be elected the following year, again representing all regions.

The question of who should be invited, and who should not be, remains a difficult conundrum. Setting the bar too high when it comes to a country's level of adherence to democratic values will reduce participation to a small group of states and will potentially leave out those in need of support to advance on a more democratic path. Equally setting the bar too low brings to the table too many governments clearly not committed to democratic reforms.

In the future, responsibility for invitations could be given to regional hosts of particular initiatives, with these representatives deciding on the minimum standards required in partnership with regional bodies and even civil society organisations, an approach that could reduce perceptions of geo-politics shaping the process. Satellite meetings should be held in each region that might include some not-fully-democratic states, to show an inclusive approach and to maintain opportunities for dialogue rather than confrontation and competition. This is a necessary step to incorporate the Global South, most of which is trying to maintain its swing-state status, both regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine and regarding the US-China confrontation.


A shift to civil society

Democratic coordination after the second S4D summit in March should move away from being such a state-centred process. In its next phase, democratic coordination needs to be more inclusive of civil society. **The future of the democratic coordination should now shift from a process of democratic governments to one of global democrats.**

In particular, civil society organizations from non-democracies could find a role to spur attention to reform dynamic in non-democracies whose governments are not in the summit process. For those countries not invited, efforts could be made to identify local groups or activists who can attend and highlight ongoing efforts to overcome impediments to democratization. Civil society could be given a much more formalized role in monitoring reform commitments – as this has been the weak spot in the process to date.

The non-state orientation would help to bring in the Global South fully. The strong state-centric lens when discussing democracy in relation with security has lessened the enthusiasm of many non-Western democracies and democrats. This makes the discussion seem divisive, strategic, and ideological. Bringing in the civil society into the picture will make people realize that the network of democrats can be established not only across borders, but across regime types. The future plans should also include regional or global grassroots citizen assemblies. Efforts must be made to identify and broaden the democratic base from civil society.

This makes it necessary to expand and transform the S4D process, which began as an intergovernmental scheme,



into a permanent public-private network in which each stakeholder participates proactively. Criticisms that the Summit is an anti-China framework can be mitigated by ensuring diversity within the network. By more actively involving actors such as civil society and business, and by creating a framework that allows these actors to be brought into the network without having to be nominated by governments, the network can bring in prominent democratic actors who are suppressed in their own countries.

Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has prompted many Western governments to raise their level of ambition in support of democratic norms. Non-Western democracies do not see the invasion as a game changer and resist being pushed to choose sides on this issue but do see some merit in a future form of democratic coordination that addresses their concerns. There is still a sense that the democratic community is on the back foot and in need of more meaningful and effective coordination. The need for democratic coordination will become greater in the future, due to Russian actions but also due to the wider set of challenges related to authoritarianism and the difficulties facing democratic decision-making. The US-led summit process has usefully begun new reflection on these challenges. A longer-term process will be needed to deepen these policy rethinks. **The process should not exactly mirror the current S4D initiative but build from its strong elements into a more strategic, more inclusive, and tailored initiative for democratic coordination.**

About the authors

Richard Youngs (Coordinator) is a senior fellow in the Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program, based at Carnegie Europe. He is also member of the Forum 2000 Program Council and of the International Coalition for Democratic Renewal (ICDR). He works on EU foreign policy and on issues of international democracy. Youngs is also a professor of international relations at the University of Warwick.

Idayat Hassan is the director of the Abuja Based Centre for Democracy and Development and a senior associate (non resident) at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Maiko Ichihara is a Professor of international relations at Hitotsubashi University, Japan. She is member of the Forum 2000 Program Council and of the International Coalition for Democratic Renewal (ICDR). She also serves on the steering committees of the World Movement for Democracy, the East Asia Democracy Forum, and Japan Factcheck Center.

Julia Keutgen is Programme Manager for the Supporting Team Europe Democracy Programme at International IDEA, focusing on the Summit for Democracy. Previously, she worked for the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) and at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in different positions.

Sook Jong Lee was a professor of Graduate School of Governance at Sungkyunkwan University from September 2005 to February 2023. She is also member of the International Coalition for Democratic Renewal (ICDR) and of the Steering Committee of the World Movement for Democracy. She served at the East Asia Institute as President from 2008 to 2018 and now Senior Fellow of the Institute. She leads the Asian Democracy Research Network since 2013.

Constanza Mazzina is PhD in Political Science (UCA, Argentina). She is member of Democratic Solidarity. She did her post-doc in Latin American politics at IBEI (Barcelona, Spain). Master in Economics and Political Science (ESEADE). She is currently the Academic Coordinator at DemoAmlat, senior Fellow at CESCOS, teacher at undergraduate (UADE, UCA, UBA) and postgraduate (UB, USAL, ESEADE).

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