

Discussion Paper

Towards a Global Cooperation for Democracy

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With input from Jiří Schneider

Introduction

Recently, democracy's primacy as an international norm has been seriously questioned. As a result, there is a growing understanding of a need for democracies on a global scale to enhance their cooperative efforts. These should ensure that democratic values and principles remain protected, thrive, and deliver freedom and prosperity to as many people around the world as possible. This briefing outlines the current challenges to global democracy and the lessons that can be learned to create a more secure environment for democratic norms going forward. It also looks at ongoing initiatives which can potentially bring about future collective action by democracies to safeguard democratic values and confront a creeping tide of authoritarianism. The briefing closes with points of departure for a discussion and consideration.

Challenging Democracy in the 21st Century

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, it appeared as if the time had come for democracy to be recognized as the international norm as states embraced universal suffrage, freedom of thought, and free-market economics. As the 21st century began, however, it became clear that this perceived providence was opposed by powerful actors whose influence grew as Western champions of democracy became embroiled in perpetual wars of state-building, in-fought over issues of identity and populism, and overlooked growing economic inequalities within their populaces.

These historically authoritarian actors, such as the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, among others, offer an alternative form of government to democracy which in increasingly turbulent times appears ever more attractive. The key selling point of this alternative is a perception of stability which will promote prosperity for the nation, and only at the cost of select civil liberties, which an individual in the constituency might see as fair trade, especially if these changes in society more closely align with their worldview. These actors also court the private sector, offering market predictability, profitability, and a favorable regulatory environment, asking in return "only" for the state control over economic affairs.

■ The Democratic Rebuttal

There are valid criticisms of democratic governance in these selling points, but they do not overcome the pitfalls of authoritarianism, nor are they inherent faults, which cannot be mediated. The stability offered is given with an iron hand, which, when challenged, balls into a fist; a creeping revocation of civil liberties boxes free-will into a sterile mold of government approval and mutes opposition; state control over economics leads to state capture of industry and commerce, breeding corruption and stagnation. Democratic actors have missed opportunities in recent years to highlight these realities and promote solutions, instead of believing that the providence of democracy will guide others to falling into the fold. This faith in the providence of democracy is in itself a shortcoming, as it has led to idealistic, rather than pragmatic approaches to confronting challenges.

■ Examining Challenges

Developments in the 21st century have made it easier to challenge democracy by spreading disinformation to make authoritarianism appear a more attractive alternative. The proliferation of social media and its integration into daily life is one such development. Authoritarian governments and their allies have a multitude of avenues to approach citizenry and distribute propaganda, misinformation, and sow dissent among a population online. The spreading of disinformation is not exclusive to the realm of cyberspace; traditional media outlets, such as television and print media, are also susceptible to authoritarian influences. According to a [report](#) by Louisa Lim and Julia Bergin published in the Guardian in 2018, "the state-run English-language newspaper China Daily has struck deals with at least 30 foreign newspapers – including the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, and the UK Telegraph – to carry four- or eight-page inserts called China Watch,

which can appear as often as monthly. The supplements take a didactic, old-school approach to propaganda; recent headlines include ‘Tibet has seen 40 years of shining success’, ‘Xi unveils opening-up measures’ and – least surprisingly of all – ‘Xi praises Communist party of China members.’”

Within their borders authoritarian actors, such as China, Russia, Iran, or Venezuela, control the media to meet their own needs and curate the national narrative. Social media is used to disseminate disinformation attacking democratic practices and glorify the power of the state and its leaders. Reactions to these stories, posts, and comments are monitored for dissent, those accused can be subjected to censorship, penalties, or even arrest. Traditional media outlets are either state-controlled or work in close collaboration with the state to ensure a unity of narrative. These outlets are often used in conjunction with social media to give legitimacy to claims of democratic processes and slander opposition within the country which champions the ruling government.

Developments in the business world have also created opportunities for authoritarians. Trans-national conglomerates, many of which are based in democracies and have balance sheets rivaling that of medium-sized states, have developed cultures of growth and profit-seeking independent of the national agendas where they are based. These businesses work openly and through numerous shell enterprises with authoritarian states in the pursuit of short-term monetary gains, but which have long-term consequences for democratic causes. For example, manufacturing companies build their factories in authoritarian states, relying on these manufacturing sites, which then leaves them vulnerable to coercion by authoritarian actors who control economic means in their state with no legislative repercussions. In the cyber industry, major corporations are allowed into authoritarian markets on the condition that anti-establishment content is censored at the government’s behest (especially during faux-election cycles), data on political dissenters is turned over to authorities on request, and mass-user data can be accessed for state surveillance.

Often a stipulation of doing business in these states is the sharing of intellectual property which at times is dual-use¹ and can undercut democratic states’ efforts to control the distribution of technology to authoritarian actors which can reverse engineer them for their own purposes. These businesses are vital to stable economics in democratic states, and their vulnerability to fall under the influence of authoritarian actors presents a real threat to democracies. This is redoubled when appreciating the growing influence large corporations have over democratic processes.

Within their own societies democracies are also being met with an increasing number of challenges. The most visible of these is doubtlessly the growth of extremist groups who have grown out of and exacerbated the polarization of society. These groups present a problem for democratic systems: how can you allow for political freedom and freedom of speech while preventing violent extremism? There is no clear-cut answer, nor is there a solution that will completely extinguish the flame of extremism; how democracies deal with this existential issue is critical for its renewal. As extremism grows, its representatives place themselves within the structure of governance. Should they be left unchecked, they hold the potential to lock democratic politics into a perpetual cycle of reactionary populism, wherein the extremes of the political spectrum constantly vie to alter the status quo in their favor. In the short-term, this leads to political stagnation, in the long-term it sows the seeds for civil discord and the disintegration of democratic values.

There are several other challenges that democracies face internally, including low civic participation in democratic governance, the weakening of institutions, or the rising social and economic inequalities, which, if left unattended, may cause long-term harm to the viability of the democratic system.

¹ Meaning a technology which has a commercial use but can also be used for other purposes, often concerning military and cyber security applications

Lessons

What lessons should democracies learn from recent developments to be more robust in facing the challenges of authoritarianism in the future?

■ **Democracy cannot be supported on providence**

Challenges to democratic values need to be met head-on both internationally and within democratic countries; support for this endeavor must be genuine to overcome authoritarianism's rise. This includes acting to promote democratic values even if it comes at the risk of losing profit, the risk of losing influence, and the risk of rethinking grand strategy goals. Protecting democracy requires constant vigilance and its promotion requires taxing effort, falling short on either project an image of weakness in the face of authoritarianism and leaves a vacuum for it to fill.

■ **Safeguarding democracy means fighting disinformation**

Disinformation spreads at an alarming rate and is accelerated by the actions of undemocratic actors within society and by authoritarians internationally. Allowing disinformation to root as a norm in a democratic society is detrimental to its functioning and erodes the values it creates over time. It is apparent that presenting factual information and correcting disinformation is no longer enough to stop the harm its spread creates. Democracies must address this problem at the source and create legal frameworks to hold those who create disinformation with the intent to disrupt democratic processes accountable.

■ **Observers are not blind to 'realpolitik' actions by democracies**

The "realpolitik temptations" of political and business leaders to sacrifice democratic and humanitarian values in the name of prosperity for their constituencies, or in the interest of corporations, to achieve profitable deals with autocratic regimes, do not go unnoticed. To their constituencies, it shows that their government is willing to sacrifice values for returns that are likely intangible or frivolous to the individual. To 3rd world countries, it shows that promises are only tools of influence that can disappear with winds of opportunism. To authoritarians, it presents exploitable cracks in the façade of democracy to spread their own influences. Democratic actors and members of their public and private sector need to be held accountable for violating democratic norms, not in backroom reprimands, but publicly to show to the world that the values promoted by democracies are protected by democracies.

■ **Providing edge-giving technology to authoritarians should be publicized and penalized**

Many of the technologies authoritarian states use to subvert democratic values and abuse human rights, such as AI used to track citizens and spread disinformation online, were developed originally in democratic states and were transferred with little oversight as part of trade deals or contracts with individual companies. Stricter regulations are needed regarding what technologies are shared with authoritarian actors, especially technologies which have dual-use capabilities and can be used in surveillance and machine learning. Actors who violate these regulations need to be held accountable both legally and in the court of public opinion.

■ **The root causes of radicalization and extremism in democratic societies must be addressed**

The rise of radicalization and extremism in democratic societies is an existential crisis which must be rectified for democracy to remain a functioning form of governance. The very idea of democracy rests on peaceful compromise in society and the acknowledgment of transfers of power brought on by public choice, even if the individual's preference for the arbiter of that power did not meet the needed plurality for election. By their nature, radicals and extremists are un-democratic in their inability to accept a mandate other than that within their narrow worldview; this is a breach of the social contract within a democratic society and should be met head-on across both sides of the political spectrum. Extremists and radicals under a false impression of disenfranchisement have, and will continue to, reach out to authoritarian actors for support in meeting their own goals.

Points of departure for discussion

The need for democracies to act as a united front against the tide of authoritarianism in the international community has reached an imperative. For the continued success of democracy, both internally and internationally, democracies must come to terms with 21st-century realities which, if ignored, will erode the perception of democracy as the desired norm. Below are points of departure for discussion on key points made in this paper and for issues that need to be addressed by democratic actors going forward.

■ **The act of holding elections is not necessarily indicative of democracy**

Autocratic leaders and power structures can use coercive and rigged electoral processes to create a falsified mandate of popular support. Faux-democratic systems must be identified and called out to rebuild the reputation of democratic governance. By not confronting and publicizing faux-elections it both weakens the image of democratic processes within democratic societies and gives legitimacy to rigged elections.

■ **Alliance for Democracy versus Alliance of Democracies**

Elections are not the only indicator of a functioning democracy, and in countries described as illiberal democracies, there are restrictions on basic human rights and freedoms, including freedom of expression and assembly. The leaders of such countries exceed the constitutional limits of their own power and consolidate extraordinary governmental prerogatives. In Europe, these include Hungary and Poland, which have moved away from political liberalism; outside Europe, Brazil and India tend to be associated with this term. It is, therefore, necessary to discuss what criteria should be set in the process of forming closer cooperation between democracies. There are essentially two options, the first being inclusive, involving as many actors as possible that consider themselves democratic, and focusing on a specific agenda and action plan rather than values. The second option is an exclusive alliance, based on adherence to predetermined criteria, focusing on the inherent tenets of democracy, and seeking to increase its resilience to internal and external authoritarian influences.

■ **Supporting authoritarian actors perpetuates authoritarian governance**

The current norm of economic and political cooperation with autocratic actors in the name of realpolitik agendas and profit-seeking must be done away with in order to repair the image of democratic actors as uncompromising in their support of human rights, democratic values, and in support of a stable environment. Democracies cannot continue to talk out of both sides of their mouth in support of democratic values, and they cannot continue to act as if 3rd country constituencies are ignorant to such hypocrisy.

■ **Democracy promotion needs to take place internally and externally**

Democracy can be never taken for granted, both protection and promotion are needed for its continued success, even in societies where democracy is an established norm. Anti-democratic actors and groups within a democratic country can be employed (consciously or otherwise) by authoritarian actors to meet their goals and disrupt democratic stability. Extremism and radicalism are detrimental to a functioning democratic society and their recent growth indicates flaws in a democratic society which need to be rectified such as economic and social inequality, the unanswered proliferation of disinformation, and the stagnation of legislative processes.

■ **Democratic leadership should not be exclusive to the West**

A diversity of democratic systems in a global cooperative of democratic actors is not only possible but desirable; the participation of non-western democracies is vital to the success of global democracy's promotion and protection. They not only offer fresh perspectives on democratic values and processes, but also, show unaligned countries that the spread of democracy is not neo-colonialism or coercion to westernize.

Current initiatives

Currently, several government-level initiatives aim to unite democratic governments and other democratic actors in a common front to answer the above-mentioned challenges.

The most anticipated one is the Summit of Democracies, scheduled for December 9 and 10, 2021, in Washington, DC. US President Biden calls on democracies to unite vis-à-vis the common challenges and aims to organize the summit discussions around fighting corruption, defense against authoritarianism, including election security, and advancing human rights in both democratic and non-democratic societies. The administration already plans for a 2022 follow-up summit, which aims to show how democracies can deliver on the issues that matter most to people: strengthening accountable governance, expanding economic opportunities, protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, and enabling lives of dignity. The US initiative also hopes to show how open, rights-respecting societies can work together to effectively tackle the great challenges of our time, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and growing inequality.

The German-French Alliance for Multilateralism is another initiative, launched in 2019 to promote global cooperation at a time of rising nationalism and isolationism. French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian said that the alliance's first objective would be to show that countries which "support multilateralism and support the United Nations remain the majority in the world". Its second objective is to establish a network of countries to support multilateralism and cooperative efforts; including combating inequality, climate change, and addressing the consequences of new technologies.

There have been other discussions and efforts in recent months on bringing democratic countries together in different formats and on various platforms, such as the G7, D10, the QUAD in the Indo-Pacific, or even considerations about strengthening the "democracy layer" of NATO. How and where all these initiatives will go is yet to be seen, but as the recent AUKUS experience demonstrates, a great deal of cautiousness is necessary in order to ensure that the strengthening of democratic cooperation does not lead to inflexibility or infighting.

Recommendations, Next Steps

The following are recommendations for a path forward to strengthen democratic efforts internationally and within democracies.

- 1. Creation of an inclusive coalition for democracy instead of an exclusive coalition of democracies.** A coalition for democracy should not be a matter of "fully-democratic states" nor should it be for governments only. Embracing a broader scope of stakeholders would ensure the necessary grassroots support by constituencies and increase the likelihood of follow-up.
- 2. Defenders of democracy need a reliable, global network of international publicity and solidarity which shields them against persecution. To these ends, a global democratic network should be formed** by individuals representing governments, businesses, NGOs, and media which make a broad "chain for democracy". This global democratic network should complement summits and conferences as a day-to-day support vehicle, based perhaps on the structures such as the International Coalition for Democratic Renewal or similar existing efforts.
- 3. The defensive aspects of the protection of democracy, from both external threats and internal challenges, should be accompanied by the active promotion of democracy.** It is only natural that defending and protecting democracy by making it more efficient and resilient, makes it more potent and compelling. Any policy discussion about democratic resilience should be accompanied by a discussion of democracy promotion and vice versa.

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