



A Grand Strategy of Democratic Solidarity

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A Grand Strategy of Democratic Solidarity

On March 12, 1947, Harry Truman addressed a joint session of Congress with a very specific proposal: emergency aid for Greece and Turkey, which were menaced by a communist insurgency and facing Soviet intimidation, respectively. But Truman, speaking at the dawn of the Cold War, framed the matter far more expansively. Allowing the countries of the world to “work out a way of life free from coercion,” he explained, had been a “fundamental issue in the war with Germany and Japan.” At a time when “nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life,” the United States must once again “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities by outside pressures.”¹

Some of Truman’s own advisers were uneasy at this sweeping language.² Truman himself admitted that the Turkish and Greek governments were, at best, quasi-democracies. Yet he nonetheless presented matters starkly in order to rally Americans to the banner of containment and capture what was ultimately at stake in the Cold War. The fundamental question, Truman understood, was not simply about Greece and Turkey. It was whether the postwar world would be shaped by liberal principles of self-determination and freedom of choice—or would instead be molded by coercion, predation, and authoritarian aggression.

Truman would recognize the situation America and its allies confront today. Democracies are again threatened by illiberal influences within their borders

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and by ambitious autocratic regimes—principally China and Russia—seeking to reshape global order. Whereas the world’s democracies had the wind at their back after the Cold War, today they are often divided, demoralized, and on the defensive. The overarching strategic question of this century is whether the United States and other democracies can preserve a system predicated on the dominance of liberal governments and liberal ideas, or whether the world will slip back toward a state in which illiberal regimes and coercive practices are ascendant.³

The Trump administration frequently made this challenge worse by embracing autocratic rulers abroad, degrading democratic norms at home, and sowing disunity among the world’s democracies. President Biden, by contrast, has called for a global summit of democracies and put the idea of deeper democratic cooperation at the center of his statements on foreign policy.⁴ But what a grand strategy of democratic solidarity would entail, conceptually and operationally, and how it might overcome the challenges offered by its critics, has remained more elusive.⁵ Defining that agenda is critical to seizing the opportunity Biden’s election offers—and allowing the world’s democracies to retake the global initiative.

The Strategic Logic of Democratic Solidarity

At its core, a grand strategy of democratic solidarity is a new name for an old idea. Long before political scientists articulated “democratic peace” theory, Cold War-era political leaders concluded that America’s closest friends were countries that shared its commitment to liberal governance as well as its interest in containing Soviet power. The United States might forge transactional partnerships with friendly authoritarians, and disputes between Washington and its democratic allies could be incredibly bitter. But the heart of Cold War grand strategy involved binding the United States to other leading democracies—particularly in Western Europe and the Asia-Pacific—and thereby creating a cohesive strategic community that could withstand Soviet pressure while building a cooperative, liberal world. America’s “ties with the great industrial democracies,” that supposed arch-realist Henry Kissinger explained, “are ... not alliances of convenience but a union of principle in defense of values and a way of life.”⁶ Pursuing democratic solidarity was not a distraction from, or substitute for, geopolitical goals such as maintaining a favorable balance of power. It was then, as it is now, a way of accomplishing those objectives.

This emphasis on democratic solidarity waned, ironically, just when democratic dominance was most pronounced. After the Cold War, Washington sought to spread liberal ideas ever-further afield. But the geopolitical premium on democratic solidarity decreased at a time when the world's remaining autocracies seemed weak, isolated, and destined for historical oblivion. The apparent significance of ideological divisions faded as it became fashionable to believe that globalization, liberalization, and economic integration would tame and perhaps transform autocratic regimes. By the end of George W. Bush's presidency, moreover, any strategy rooted in an emphasis on liberal values had become suspect, thanks to costly, inconclusive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan fought partly in the name of promoting democracy. Today, however, the strategic landscape has shifted dramatically, and a grand strategy rooted in democratic cooperation has become essential for several reasons.

Improving democracy at home should be a complement to, not a substitute for, leadership abroad

First, the era of effortless democratic dominance is over. As political scientists Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefan Foa have written, by 2018 the share of global GDP possessed by established democracies had fallen below 50 percent for the first time since the late 1800s.⁷ An authoritarian Russia is reasserting its power across the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa; a neo-totalitarian China is contending for regional dominance in Asia and global influence. From the dangers posed by Russian political warfare and Chinese economic coercion to the possibility that authoritarian leadership in new technologies might tilt the arc of history toward illiberalism, the democratic community faces perils its members cannot effectively confront on their own.

Second, geopolitical conflict is increasingly breaking down along ideological lines. It is true, as realist scholars argue, that the US-Russia and US-China contests are struggles over the global balance of power.⁸ Yet it is also true that Chinese and Russian leaders are challenging the liberal international order in part because they view the principles of that order as an existential threat to their regimes and believe they would be safer in a more illiberal world. As a result, both Beijing and Moscow are working to roll back the global influence of democratic norms and weaken the democratic countries opposing their revisionist designs.⁹ Indeed, by co-opting international organizations, diffusing advanced surveillance technology, supporting a coterie of authoritarian rulers abroad, and touting the virtues of authoritarian capitalism, Beijing in particular is striving to create an international environment in which autocratic systems are protected and potentially preeminent. The clash of liberalism and illiberalism is

more central to global affairs than at any time since the Cold War, and US strategy should reflect that reality.

It should also reflect a third reality—that stress on democratic values is critical for domestic mobilization in great-power conflicts. “Geopolitical abstractions and economic statistics may be important,” writes Princeton professor Aaron Friedberg, “but historically what has moved and motivated the American people is a recognition that the principles on which their system is founded are under threat.”¹⁰ As Truman understood, rallying Americans for long, dangerous rivalries—with all the expense and sacrifice they entail—requires speaking to their ideological passions as well as economic concerns and geopolitical interests.

Fourth, democratic solidarity is a means of strategic reassurance in the post-Trump era. The Trump administration deserves some credit for reorienting American statecraft toward great-power rivalry. But the blatantly illiberal aspects of Trump’s foreign policy—solicitude for dictators, disdain for human rights and democratic values, indifference to international law, naked coercion of longtime allies—as well as the president’s assault on democratic norms within the United States sowed deep concerns among US allies about the future of American leadership.¹¹ A grand strategy focused on cooperation with democracies—if paired with efforts to fortify American democracy itself—can mitigate the damage by showing that America can still provide principled leadership on behalf of a liberal world order.

Fifth, democracies face worsening threats from within. Illiberal actors have hollowed out democracies that were thought to be consolidated in countries such as Venezuela, Turkey, and Hungary. Quasi-authoritarian leaders are challenging democratic norms and institutions in countries from the Philippines to India to Poland.¹² Not even the world’s seemingly most stable and established democracies—such as the United States—are immune from this disease.

Washington needs a grand strategy that can help protect the democratic community from its internal enemies as well as its external ones.

Finally, the United States should think expansively about democratic solidarity because its existing alliances and institutions are not adequate, on their own, to address today’s challenges. American alliances are organized regionally or bilaterally. The Group of Seven (G-7) includes Japan but is otherwise a transatlantic body. Yet threats to democracy are emerging on a global scale;

the problems posed by Russian political warfare and Chinese coercion are affecting countries from Oceania to Africa to Western Europe. This is not an argument

Existing alliances and institutions are not adequate, on their own, to address today’s challenges

to form a single global institution to address these problems. But the world's democracies will struggle to respond effectively unless they find more ambitious ways of summoning their combined energies.

Function, Not Form

The Biden administration recognizes this challenge: Biden himself has called for a foreign policy rooted in democratic values since before he announced his bid for the White House. But the major initiative Biden proposed during the campaign—a global summit of democracies—may not be the most effective way to start, because it would make intractable definitional questions and purity tests an impediment to the practical cooperation that is urgently required.¹³ (Do backsliding or partial democracies merit an invitation? Where does one draw the line between liberal and illiberal regimes?) Nor should the United States create a formal global alliance of democracies: a full-fledged military pact that spans multiple regions will lack the cohesion to operate effectively in any of them. Building an even looser global organization—a United Nations comprised solely of democracies—is also problematic, because it would risk creating a lowest common denominator approach to key problems and might take years to bear meager fruit.

Rather, a grand strategy of democratic solidarity should not be a one-size-fits-all approach. It should account for the fact that different groups of states may choose to act in response to different challenges. It should accommodate the widely varying capabilities, risk tolerances, and strategic situations of democratic states. It should not rule out transactional cooperation with non-democracies, even as it puts principled democratic cooperation at the core of American statecraft. Above all, its measure of success should be progress in expanding democratic collaboration against concrete problems, rather than the creation of elaborate new structures that bring all the world's democracies into a single forum.

Success should be progress in expanding democratic collaboration, not creating a single forum

As a general principle, then, a grand strategy of democratic solidarity should focus primarily on building denser, overlapping networks of cooperation around key issues, and exploiting—where possible—nascent moves in this direction. It should, for instance, encourage emerging trans-regional efforts such as the desire of key European powers—namely France, the United Kingdom, and Germany—to play a greater role in the Indo-Pacific. It should expand and enhance the activities of established groupings, whether by using the

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (commonly called the Quad) as the basis for increased democratic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, or turning the G-7 into a larger body that fosters technological cooperation among democracies in North America, Europe, and Asia. It should update old arrangements, such as the Five Eyes intelligence partnership (involving Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand), for new and more ambitious diplomatic purposes.¹⁴ And it should foster initiatives, such as the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, that link democratic actors possessing shared security concerns.¹⁵

In other words, democratic solidarity is more a matter of function than form. Just as important, it should leverage the distinct geopolitical advantages democracies possess while offsetting their weaknesses. Open societies are vulnerable to attacks that pervert, distort, or weaponize their open information ecosystems. Authoritarian regimes can act with considerable purpose and stealth while using autocratic discipline to harness the resources of their societies. Yet democracies possess advantages of their own, from the greater intellectual and economic dynamism that open societies foster, to the greater political resilience that democratic legitimacy and procedures endow, to the fact that democratic societies are typically better than illiberal societies in forming and maintaining authentic coalitions over time. Finally, although the balance of power has shifted, capable democracies interested in upholding the international order still outnumber and outweigh, economically and geopolitically, the autocracies menacing that order.¹⁶ A key advantage democracies must exploit, therefore, is the collective strength that allows them to reduce the costs, dangers, and uncertainties associated with individual action.

The Eight Pillars of Solidarity

What does collective strength mean in practice? A grand strategy of democratic solidarity should rest on eight pillars that comprise efforts to shield the world's democracies from authoritarian pressure, while enabling them to exert selective counter-pressures of their own.¹⁷

The Eight Pillars of Democratic Solidarity

1. Countering Coercion
2. Enhancing Technological Cooperation
3. Shaping International Institutions
4. Combating Corruption
5. Enhancing Collective Defense
6. Meeting Threats from Within
7. Taking the Offensive
8. Negotiating from Strength

Countering Coercion

The first pillar involves strengthening collective responses to authoritarian political warfare and economic coercion. In 1946, American diplomat George Kennan noted that “totalitarian governments have at their disposal every measure capable of influencing other governments as a whole, or their members, or their peoples behind their back.”¹⁸ That basic problem persists today. As part of ambitious geopolitical offensives, authoritarian regimes are reaching directly into democratic societies to exploit their divisions and inhibit their ability to resist. Russian information operations, cyberattacks, and political meddling exacerbate social and political cleavages throughout the Western world.¹⁹ Chinese economic coercion batters democracies that challenge Beijing’s domestic or foreign conduct.²⁰ Whether by sanctioning foreign firms whose employees criticize Chinese repression or demanding that Australia silence voices hostile to Beijing as the price of good relations, the CCP is weaponizing economic influence to stifle free speech around the globe.²¹

This coercion is so potent not simply because of the size of the Chinese market or because supply chains in virtually every sector run through China; the problem is also that Beijing plays divide-and-conquer, punishing one disobedient democracy to warn others against incurring its wrath. The harsh sanctions the CCP placed on Australia—which sends 33 percent of its exports to China—in late 2020 were likely meant to have precisely this effect.²² Only collective action can lessen the pain of individual resistance.

Only collective action can lessen the pain of individual resistance

Pursuing greater economic integration among democracies, for example, can gradually reduce individual countries’ reliance on Chinese export markets.²³ Cooperating to move critical supply chains out of China—as India, Japan, and Australia are now attempting with their nascent supply-chain alliance—can reduce vulnerability to the withholding of critical imports.²⁴ Devising common responses to Chinese economic coercion—whether coordinated retaliatory sanctions or mechanisms to temporarily offset economic damage caused by lost exports—can reduce the leverage Beijing wields in one-on-one showdowns.²⁵

Similarly, when it comes to Russian or Chinese political meddling, democratic solidarity might emphasize expanded sharing of intelligence and exchanges of best practices in detecting and countering malign actions. Given that transparency is the best tool democracies possess for fighting disinformation, one area of cooperation might be exchanging insights from successful public education campaigns, such as Finland’s effort to prepare its citizens to detect and fight fake news.²⁶ And because a static defense is not sufficient to ward off systematic political warfare attacks, greater synchronization of economic and diplomatic

penalties is critical to making these skirmishes less costly to democracies and more expensive for autocracies. Just as numerous countries conducted coordinated expulsions of Russian diplomats following the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal on British soil, sharper collective responses can limit the damage and diminish the strategic returns of authoritarian political warfare.

Enhancing Technological Cooperation

A second pillar involves answering the authoritarian technological challenge. Long-standing democratic leads have been eroded or even vanished in areas such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, quantum computing, digital payments, and commercial drones. China is using generous state subsidies, massive intellectual property (IP) theft, forced technology transfer, access to vast pools of data, concerted investment strategies, and other authoritarian advantages to produce, scale, and export critical technologies.²⁷ Although China's long-term innovation trajectory remains uncertain, the strategic implications of these efforts are potentially momentous: if China uses "national champions" such as Huawei to dominate 5G telecommunications networks in the developing world, Beijing will reap tremendous economic leverage and entrench friendly autocrats along the Digital Silk Road. If Beijing sets the pace in critical areas such as AI, quantum computing, and synthetic biology, it will leave its democratic rivals at a geopolitical disadvantage—and make centralized autocracy appear to be the wave of the future.

Democratic governments are well-equipped to compete, given that intellectual freedom, robust protection of intellectual property rights and civil liberties, and world-class higher education are critical enablers of successful innovation. Yet greater collaboration is needed: while China has nearly caught America in research & development (R&D) investment, the "free world" share nearly doubles when the outlays of France, Germany, India, Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom are factored in.²⁸ Leading democracies must work together to blunt China's technological offensive.²⁹

This collaboration might entail sharing access to the data sets used to "train" artificial intelligence, working jointly to shape global standards for testing and validating key technologies, and pooling resources to facilitate the development and subsidize the adoption of alternatives to Chinese 5G technology. Here, a "D-10" or "T-12"—essentially, an enlarged G-7 focused increasingly on tech issues—can play the coordinating role.³⁰ This approach might also involve standardizing export controls on key technologies, such as semiconductors, where democratic nations still possess—and must retain—significant advantages. The dichotomy between running faster and slowing China down is a false one when it comes to technology; the United States and its democratic friends must do both to prevent aggressive autocrats from gaining a strategic edge.

Shaping International Institutions

The third pillar entails contesting authoritarian gains in the international institutions that shape global norms and standards in areas from intellectual property to internet protocols. As the Trump administration systematically downgraded US involvement with international organizations, Beijing advanced a Chinese-centric model meant to bolster the domestic authority and international influence of the CCP. For example, China has exerted growing influence over how the UN defines, supports, and monitors human rights, with the clear aim of weakening UN oversight of domestic abuses in China and other authoritarian states.³¹ During the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing exploited its influence over the World Health Organization (WHO) to discourage the early disclosure of information that might have damaged the legitimacy and prestige of the CCP. Similarly, Russia and China have cooperated to promote principles of Internet governance that favor the sovereignty of authoritarian regimes.³²

As international institutions become fields of competition, democratic nations should cooperate to ensure that those institutions do not become mechanisms of domestic entrenchment and global reach for authoritarian regimes. Rather than simply withdrawing from flawed organizations such as the UN Human Rights Council or WHO, the United States should work with democratic friends to reform them—if necessary, using the leverage that the leading democracies' combined financial contributions to international organizations provides. It should build on a promising but inconsistently pursued Trump-era initiative by organizing broad democratic coalitions to prevent Chinese candidates from winning leadership elections in key bodies.³³ This will occasionally require settling for second-best candidates or initiatives supported by a broad mass of (for example) European democracies, rather than splitting the democratic vote and allowing Beijing or Moscow to have its way.

Combating Corruption

A fourth pillar should be a robust anti-corruption agenda. Autocrats use illicit financial flows to enrich themselves and lubricate illiberal political systems; they also weaponize corruption geopolitically to influence self-interested actors and weaken rival democracies. In developing nations, this “strategic corruption” degrades legitimacy, erodes sovereignty, and creates a basis for partnerships between kleptocratic leaders and their authoritarian sponsors in Moscow and Beijing.³⁴ In mature democracies, corruption can pervert political processes, warp decision-making, and compromise critical institutions. This pattern of corruption has been enabled, ironically, by the system of globalized finance that Washington and its key allies promoted after the Cold War—in a world of mobile capital, stolen money easily crosses borders and finds havens, including in Western financial centers and real estate markets.

The fight against corruption is thus vital strategic terrain for democracies.³⁵ It is also a field that democratic systems, with their relatively higher levels of transparency, judicial independence, and respect for rule of law, are well-placed to contest. By eliminating tax havens, cracking down on illicit financial transactions, and highlighting kleptocratic practices in Moscow and Beijing, democracies can go on the offensive by targeting the pocketbooks and political slush funds of authoritarian leaders. (Banning anonymous shell companies, as the United States recently did, is an important step.³⁶) By promoting investment and aid practices that model transparency and rule of law, Washington and its friends can combat the corruption that renders developing democracies vulnerable to authoritarian influence. Multilateral action is essential here, given that illicit transactions cut across borders and jurisdictions and that the relative costs of attacking corruption are reduced when that task is done collectively. In the same vein, greater democratic coordination of aid and investment programs is essential, to maximize the resources the democratic community can wield in competing with authoritarian initiatives such as China's Belt and Road.

Enhancing Collective Defense

Fifth, solidarity requires stronger support for democracies under geopolitical duress. European countries probably cannot aid Taiwan militarily in the event of a Chinese attack, but they could raise the costs of such an attack by imposing harsh economic sanctions on Beijing and by making clear, in advance, their willingness to do so.³⁷ The nations of the Quad, along with other Indo-Pacific democracies such as South Korea, can quietly consult on how they would respond to Chinese military coercion or aggression in the region. In Europe and the Indo-Pacific, democratic nations can provide greater military assistance, enhance cyber defense capabilities, and otherwise harden front-line states such as

Defending democracies also requires providing multilateral support against threats from within

Ukraine and Taiwan against the intimidation they face on a daily basis. Doing so is not simply a matter of protecting democracies under immediate threat—the success of authoritarian coercion in one place may encourage more brazen actions elsewhere.³⁸

Meeting Threats from Within

Sixth, defending democracies in danger also requires providing multilateral support against threats from within.³⁹ Throughout history, external forces have shaped internal political conflicts. The European revolutions of 1848, for example,

failed in part because they were suppressed by autocratic interventions from abroad, whereas the democratic revolutions of the 1980s and 1990s succeeded in part because they received support from a democratic superpower.⁴⁰ Today, domestic threats to democracy are intensifying around the world. Just as Russia and China often bolster autocrats under pressure, democratic forces must bring their collective weight to bear on behalf of imperiled democracies.

To that end, greater coordination of foreign assistance policies by democratic actors—including the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, European Union, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and Taiwan—can shore up democratic leaders in countries where the political system is fragile or contested. Within predominantly liberal groupings, such as NATO, the United States should encourage more forward-leaning approaches to combating illiberalism within the ranks—perhaps by coordinating bilateral suspensions of military exercises or arms sales to backsliding countries. (NATO’s consensus-based procedures make *organizational* action against wayward members difficult.)⁴¹ Diplomatic intervention can also be helpful in checking illiberal advances early—the fact that a number of America’s democratic allies quickly recognized Joe Biden’s victory in November 2020 arguably helped legitimize that victory at a time when Donald Trump was actively seeking to overturn the election results. Collective help should not preclude self-help for democracies under strain. But efforts to shore up democratic practices at home should accompany a robust commitment to strengthening fragile democracies abroad.

Taking the Offensive

Seventh, while democratic solidarity is primarily defensive, it also involves offensive measures to highlight the weaknesses, penalize the abuses, and impose costs on authoritarian regimes. This is important for several reasons: even strengthened defenses against political warfare will likely be too porous to frustrate every attack. Offensive action can therefore be a way of building leverage and even establishing deterrence in ongoing competitions; and authoritarian regimes are, at their core, comparatively brittle and unattractive, so their weaknesses must not be off-limits in high-stakes, long-term struggles.

Critically, offensive measures need not be violent or dangerously provocative. Catalyzing diplomatic support for human rights activists and anti-corruption campaigners in Russia, or for religious freedom and the rights of ethnic minorities in China, is a way of standing up for democratic values; it also underscores that these regimes simultaneously repress and fear their own people.⁴² Coordinated sanctions against officials involved in the persecution of China’s Uighurs or against the state security agents that hound—and kill—Putin’s political enemies can increase the economic and diplomatic blowback associated with

abhorrent behavior. By championing their own ideals, the world's democracies can wage political warfare against authoritarian regimes.

Calibration is important here, of course—the expected effect of such measures must always be weighed against their potential to increase tensions with nuclear powers. And even in the best case, not all democracies will be willing to take strong action in response to every atrocity: witness the decision of the European Union to conclude (in principle) an investment accord with China in late 2020, despite Beijing's quasi-genocidal policies and reliance on forced labor in Xinjiang. But like Cold War containment, democratic solidarity should emphasize intensifying the strains on authoritarian rivals even as it seeks to mitigate the strains those rivals apply against the democratic world.⁴³

Negotiating from Strength

Finally, democratic solidarity must not be confused with all-out, no-holds barred crusades against illiberal states. So, the eighth pillar of the strategy consists of coordinated cooperation with authoritarian regimes. During the Cold War, America was most effective in negotiating with the Soviet Union when it did so with the strong support of key allies. The same principle applies today. There are key issues—namely, climate change and global health—on which

Democracies must work with authoritarian powers on key issues, but not bilaterally

the United States and other democracies must work with authoritarian powers, especially China. Yet a grand strategy of democratic solidarity holds that it is a mistake to begin by negotiating bilaterally with China, as the Obama administration did in pursuing what ultimately became the Paris climate accords. Rather, the key is to develop a common position with democratic allies and partners (on goals for the COP26 climate

change conference in late 2021, for example), then use the resulting leverage in negotiations with Beijing. Democracies alone cannot address the world's most pressing transnational issues. But by stressing democratic unity from the outset, they can secure action on more favorable terms.

Addressing the Critiques

This grand strategy is ambitious, expansive, and inherently multilateral. For this reason, it is also inherently challenging. Each of the pillars outlined here may confront practical obstacles to implementation, collective action problems, and other difficulties that attend multilateral action and strategic competition. The

specifics of how to proceed in combating corruption or addressing authoritarian political warfare will invite debate. Yet this strategy is designed to alleviate the dilemmas surrounding collective action as best as possible by focusing that action around different but overlapping groupings and initiatives, rather than trying to create a single, unwieldy alliance or organization. Moreover, the difficulties associated with collective action are hardly unusual in American diplomacy, and it is not clear that the problems associated with a different strategy—for example, one that downplayed democratic values and thus forfeited the political and geopolitical advantages associated with emphasizing them—would be dramatically lower. What is most important at this stage, then, is to address some of the higher-level, more fundamental critiques that opponents of a grand strategy based on democratic solidarity have raised.

The first is that a democratic coalition is unnecessarily exclusive.⁴⁴ Not every state is a democracy, and some states that have proven particularly tenacious in resisting Russia and China are either autocracies, such as Vietnam, or backsliding democracies, such as Poland. Thus, the argument holds, a democratic coalition will be narrow and ineffective. This critique would be accurate if democratic solidarity *precluded* cooperation with illiberal regimes. And it is true that the United States will need a wide range of partnerships, with a diverse array of regimes, to resist Russian and Chinese advances. Yet democracies can forge productive, if somewhat mercenary, relationships with illiberal countries even as they cultivate the geopolitical and ideological unity of the democratic community. The fact that NATO was an alliance explicitly rooted in shared democratic values, for example, didn't prevent it from including necessary authoritarian members such as Portugal or Turkey at key points during the Cold War. Similarly, the United States can pursue democratic solidarity while cooperating, as geopolitically necessary, with partners such as Singapore and Vietnam today. Calling for deeper bonds among democracies simply reflects a recognition that the closest relationships will and should be among governments that share political values as well as geopolitical interests—and that failing to develop those relationships will leave democracies isolated and vulnerable to being picked off one-by-one. That, too, is a form of realism.

A second, related concern holds that America cannot combat illiberalism within its existing alliances—in countries such as Hungary or the Philippines—without fracturing them. Certainly, there are historical examples, such as Jimmy Carter's human rights policy, of overzealously ideological strategies alienating important partners at inopportune times. For that reason, no serious strategist advocates a blanket policy of shunning imperfect friends. Yet Washington can selectively look for opportunities to defend democratic values where they are threatened, while balancing that objective against the geopolitical importance of the country in question. Making Rodrigo Duterte's brutal drug war the

focal point of the bilateral relationship when America's position in the South China Sea rests on a knife's edge might not be wise. Using calibrated diplomatic and economic pressure against a country like Viktor Orbán's Hungary, which exemplifies European illiberalism but has no particular value to NATO, offers a better approach.

A third objection is that this grand strategy will alienate democracies that do not wish to be drawn into an explicitly anti-China or anti-Russia grouping. This is a fair point that underscores the importance of elevating function over form. An early summit of democracies could well backfire by making democratic states that are economically dependent on China—Indonesia and Malaysia, for instance—feel that they were being asked to publicly challenge Beijing. Yet the approach outlined here avoids this misstep, focusing instead on a more flexible approach that prioritizes concrete cooperation over high-profile public signaling. Additionally, because this strategy rejects a one-size-fits-all approach to such cooperation, it allows more reticent members to participate selectively at first, perhaps expanding their involvement over time.

A fourth critique is that emphasizing democratic values risks turning already-fraught rivalries into intense ideological struggles in which negotiation and de-escalation become more difficult.⁴⁵ The problem with the Truman Doctrine, from this perspective, was that it made every clash between US and Soviet interests a seemingly fundamental contest between freedom and totalitarianism. But a grand strategy centered on democratic values can—and should—involve consideration of how best to approach negotiations with autocratic regimes. The reality is that the US-China and US-Russia contests are inescapably ideological, in the sense that they involve not simply differing geopolitical interests but differing visions of what principles individual societies and the international order should be based upon. The United States gains no strategic benefit from trying to ignore fundamental aspects of great-power rivalry.

Finally, and particularly following the assault by Trump's supporters on Congress in January 2021, some argue that American democracy is so deficient that America cannot lead any democratic coalition.⁴⁶ Deep injustices remain in American society, and in the post-Trump era, the United States must strengthen its own domestic institutions, not simply as a means of diplomatic credibility but as a means of democratic survival. Reforms—whether at the federal, state, or local level—targeting systemic racism, corruption, political dysfunction, tribalism, deficient civic education, and other pathologies are imperative.

Yet this task should be seen as a complement to, rather than substitute for, a foreign policy rooted in democratic values. After all, democratic perfection at home has never been a prerequisite for democratic leadership abroad. When Truman spoke to Congress in March 1947, the United States still practiced state-sponsored segregation in large parts of the country. During the Cold War,

in fact, an ideological struggle against the Soviet Union ultimately created pressure for the United States to improve its own democracy and thereby decrease the perceived hypocrisy of its diplomacy.⁴⁷ Emphasizing ideological competition abroad can actually catalyze constructive change at home. And if the United States doesn't lead the world's democracies in confronting their common challenges, what other country will?⁴⁸

Now, All Together

The strategic logic of democratic solidarity is strong, the need is compelling, and the objections are less powerful than they might initially seem. Yet it bears repeating that a fundamental prerequisite for this strategy is that the United States show greater fidelity to democratic values, in its statecraft and in its politics, than it has manifested in recent years. The Trump administration periodically talked of rallying the free world against an authoritarian challenge, and it invested in initiatives—such as the Quad—that can contribute to this objective.⁴⁹ By and large, though, its rhetoric rang hollow given the president's illiberal inclinations at home and abroad.

President Biden now has the opportunity to model responsible democratic leadership at home and rally strong democratic coalitions abroad. When it comes to great-power rivalry, he has argued, collective action is the key: “We are stronger and more effective when we are flanked by nations that share our vision for the future of the world.”⁵⁰ That's exactly the right sentiment. Whether Biden can translate it into a coherent grand strategy of democratic solidarity will be the defining foreign policy challenge of his presidency.

Notes

1. “Truman Doctrine,” Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, March 12, 1947, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp.
2. George Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 323–24.
3. See, for instance, Larry Diamond, *Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019).
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