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Why a League of Democracies Will Not Work

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One of the most talked about concepts in the American foreign policy community over the past year or so has been the notion that the United States should organize a "Concert" or "League" of Democracies to help reorder the global power structure. This idea has been put forward not only by John McCain, the 2008 Republican presidential candidate, but also by a number of prominent Democratic advisors, including Ivo Daalder and Anthony Lake. The belief is that a grouping of fifty or so democratic nations working together would be able to protect human rights, enforce peace, and advance prosperity around the globe, and even perhaps influence nondemocratic nations to move toward democracy themselves. Such a group, it is argued, might circumvent the power of authoritarian states in the UN Security Council (notably China and Russia) that have blocked UN-sanctioned interventions in such troubled places as Kosovo, Zimbabwe, and Darfur.

Could such a proposal really work? On paper, this sort of geopolitical experiment sounds reasonable. If countries with like-minded systems of free elections and democratic governance can cooperate on economic and environmental matters and, on occasion, impose sanctions and even undertake military intervention to end abuses, would the world not be better off?

Attractive as it sounds, however, the proposal for such a new alliance is fraught with a number of fundamental flaws. First, the assumption of most proponents is that the United States would organize and lead such a group. But there is little evidence that America today has the sort of influence and standing to gather together such a conclave of nations, much less direct it. The United States does not occupy the same place in the world as when it almost singlehandedly pulled together the United Nations at the 1945 San Francisco Conference. After eight years of unpopular Bush policies, it seems even more unlikely that many democracies would rally to Washington's standard.

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Other democracies may see the idea as nothing more than a public-relations device intended to advance the prospects of U.S. politicians. This problem becomes particularly evident when such a game-changing proposition is tossed into serious discussion in the midst of a campaign for high office, as it was during the recent U.S. presidential campaign, rather than growing naturally out of some difficult or challenging circumstances (as did the United Nations) or, alternatively, as the result of carefully considered deliberation in the offices of various world capitals.

Other democracies may resist joining because they will, from the outset, question the legitimacy of a body that restricts membership to "free" states. One recalls that the United Nations, from its founding, gained its global legal standing by being a universal body that invited all nations into its ranks. This is what has given the UN its unique global juridical and political reach. By contrast, this new organization would clearly not have such authority, given that it would bar, for example, the world's most populous country and one of its few nuclear states, China, as well as another major nuclear state, Russia. Such limitations would severely test the effectiveness and viability of such a league from the start.

These limitations could also lead to other dilemmas. When the group sets out to establish standards, make treaties, promulgate demands, impose sanctions, or undertake military intervention, it will presumably be aiming most if not all of its actions at countries outside the organization, and thus not subject to its rules and regulations. Consequently, when the league tries to act against such nonmembers, its edicts will essentially be null, as they will have no standing in international law. The mere assemblage of democratic states does not offset the lack of universal membership. Indeed, the league's decrees may actually push rogue regimes, such as North Korea and Myanmar, toward defiance and resistance, or into more dire isolation. It will also certainly deepen the global divide between authoritarian governments and democracies, which could reverse attempts to reduce great power conflict. Had it existed in the 1970s, for example, such a league probably could never have negotiated the renowned Helsinki Treaty among the USSR, its satellites, and the West, thereby recognizing human rights within the Communist bloc. Nor could a League of Democracies today draw peacekeeping troops from military-led governments, such as Pakistan or Nigeria, as the UN Security Council now does. And how could this organization obtain sanctions against Iran without the involvement of China or Russia?

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This is not to say that a properly constituted "democracy caucus" could not issue pronouncements that carry moral authority around the world. Democracy does possess a sacred weight that is unrivaled on the world stage, as evidenced by the fact that even dictatorships claim to be democratic. However, for all the reasons observed, the directives of such a body would rarely be judged as acceptable to the global community. In the end, the extent of the group's impact, if any, would be determined by who its members are, what track record it creates, and how plentiful its resources are.

Many democracies may sidestep the idea of such a league because they see it as an attempt to replace the world's only existing global security body, the United Nations. If the charge is true, league advocates do have a point, however: Clearly, the UN has not always been a successful body. The organization failed to stop genocide in Rwanda and Srebrenica; more recently it has been ineffective in preventing massacres in Darfur and the Congo. But few states really question the fact that, for all its shortcomings, the UN has staved off warfare, provided much-needed peacekeeping missions, supported critical health and economic programs, and served as a meeting place for 192 nations. Most important, most democracies treasure one central feature of the UN: that the Charter enshrines domestic sovereignty as inviolable (limited though it may now be by the newly adopted "responsibility to protect" provision, which permits UN intervention when a nation commits genocide against its own people). The UN's affirmation of the nation-state is, in fact, the critical principle behind the success of the San Francisco Conference. Today the Charter is seen by many as an essential component to a well-functioning global society; and its concept of sovereignty remains of great importance to newly liberated democratic lands, fearful of meddling by international bodies of any kind.

Some advocates of a league, such as McCain, argue that the new organization would not supersede the United Nations, but merely complement it. They insist that it will primarily focus on eliminating AIDS, protecting the environment, and opening markets—all of which, one might point out, are causes currently being addressed by UN agencies. But more extreme polemicists, such as Pat Buchanan, make clear that they envisage the body (at least at times) as an alternative to the Security Council in making decisions on war and peace. Hence, the prospect of such a league, however one defines its exact parameters, contains an implicit threat to the status of the United Nations.

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In this manner, the very existence of a League of Democracies as a competitor to the United Nations is an unsettling prospect. When a crisis arises, to which body should the affected parties turn in order to seek redress? The intrusion of the league into some sort of crisis situation, even one that is a violation of international law, could throw into disarray the role of the UN, place into question the edifice of international law, and undermine peacemaking efforts.

Still, even if the United States could surmount this distrust, bringing together dozens of countries in a democratic coalition would be a singularly difficult feat. It took the loss of over 60 million lives in two world wars within twenty-five years to convince governments to organize and support the United Nations. There is no evident and compelling narrative today that would similarly motivate states toward agreeing with Washington to embrace a democratic league.

Nonetheless, let us posit for a moment that one could forge such a union. In that case, what would constitute the criteria for admission? After all, what constitutes a democracy? As Fareed Zakaria has pointed out, there are illiberal democracies as well as liberal ones. Do such illiberal democracies as Zimbabwe or Thailand get to enlist? Should a state's prospects depend on some third-party endorsement, such as Freedom House, or Human Rights Watch, or the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights? Once convened, by what procedures would the group make decisions? One possibility is that each member state would have a single vote. But that means, for example, that Costa Rica would be equal in this regard to the United States. Would Washington see this as fair or satisfactory? Further, if majority rule were to determine decisions, might not a cabal of smaller democracies, constituting a majority, foist rulings on the larger democracies—the very complaint that is so often leveled at the UN General Assembly? Might that not actually push the bigger democracies to press for a two-thirds vote requirement for league action—or even unanimity, as was true in the old League of Nations? Or, in yet another variation, might some of the larger democracies simply demand the veto, as in the Security Council? That latter matter deserves serious consideration, for American senators (who, after all, must ratify any such agreement) have historically opposed U.S. involvement in global bodies where Washington lacks the veto power.

Would there be enforcement regulations or penalties for member states that refuse to go along with the league's positions? Yes. But inevitably there will have to be some accommodation to the members' national interests. Yet would not that fact seriously undermine the league's capacity to uphold its principles? After

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all, is not the whole point of such an organization to be able to take a collective position on a question in order to enforce and implement democratic standards? In joining this group of nations, the United States might also find its own interests at risk. It is well known that France and Germany opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in the UN Security Council in 2003. Had the league existed, can anyone doubt that the same opposition would have arisen? What, one must wonder, would the United States have done under such circumstances? Would it have abandoned the organization and acted unilaterally, as it did at the United Nations? Similarly, had this league been formed in the 1970s, it seems unlikely that it could have convinced the United States to drop its opposition to sanctions on South Africa in the face of resistance from the Reagan administration. How effective, then, would it have looked under such circumstances? And how would the world react if the new league chose to intervene in the Middle East, not least given that the only voting member from the region might be Israel? These drawbacks suggest that the league would have grave difficulty around the globe in finding legitimacy.

A final concern is how the organization would be financed over the short and long term—that is, who would pay for its founding (conferences, initial staffing, temporary facilities, and so forth)—and where would its permanent headquarters be located? Even if those issues are fairly resolved, will the U.S. Congress readily pour tax dollars into an untested concept? As to permanent headquarters, certainly many member states would oppose the United States hosting yet another major international organization.

Such drawbacks have already weakened the only real experiment in this regard: the 106-nation body assembled in Warsaw in 2000 by then secretary of state Madeleine Albright—a body known as the Community of Nations. Albright's venture was the result of a visionary plan and some rigorous lobbying. That Albright was able to rally so many states to her standard is impressive. But she was only able to achieve the community at the price of setting up a loose assemblage of nations (including such dubious members as Egypt and Qatar) with no real power to set rules for global society. So far, indeed, this group has shown itself to be more a symbolic than a substantive player in world affairs.

Admittedly, the member democracies did commit themselves through the Warsaw Declaration to a multilateral framework of cooperation to advance democratic norms and to work to deepen democracy worldwide. However, almost a decade later the organization remains without an established secretariat, and

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its ministerial conferences occur only every two years. As of 2008, ministerial conclaves have been convened in Seoul, Santiago, and Bamako, Mali—but with no notable impact. The Community of Nations has reached out to civic groups and nongovernmental organizations for help, but all this activity has yet to elevate this alliance to a larger role on the world scene.

Such difficulties bring us back to the one and only universal security institution in today's world, the United Nations. In point of fact, much of what these democracy strategists are seeking can be obtained within this body. The genius of the UN from the start has been that, as stated earlier, it does not condition entry on democratic governance. This is because the UN's first responsibility has always been security; and, as all nations might be involved in conflicts, all nations must be part of the assembly. This all-inclusive membership is what gives the force of law to the UN.

The two American founders of the United Nations, presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, understood this point well. Both realized that only a permanent institution guided by a written charter and ratified by all nations would have the capacity to strengthen international cooperation. For all of its flaws, the success of the UN over the past sixty-three years in establishing international law, defusing conflict, and, most important, preventing the outbreak of a third world war is a vindication of their judgment.

Where a democracy caucus might conceivably have its greatest impact is as a lobbying group *within* the United Nations. In fact, there already *is* a democracy caucus at the UN, also known as the Community of Democracies, formed by more than eighty states in September 2004, a direct outgrowth of the Albright initiative. This lobby is still finding its way, but it may eventually find a role in affirming human rights in, for example, a fledgling agency like the Human Rights Council; in convincing nations to share the burden in attaining the Millennium Development Goals; in putting pressure on the Security Council to expand its membership and intervene to end tragedies like Darfur; in raising the flag of democratic rights within most UN councils; and in pressing the General Assembly to take action when the Council will not.

So far the caucus has had only limited success, though it has blocked Belarus and Sri Lanka from the Human Rights Council because of their ongoing engagement in human rights abuses. Still, if one does want to nurture and expand such a democratization bloc, it should be done within the United Nations—and that is where advocates of this idea should be focusing their resources and energies.

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