



## A League of Democracies or a Democratic United Nations

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The Republican presidential candidate, John McCain, has espoused a proposal put forward by specialists in international relations close to the Democratic Party, such as John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter. The proposal is to set up a new international organization that can accept as members only countries with a democratic government, a kind of League of Democracies (sometimes called also a Concert of Democracies). Senator McCain did not go into detail concerning the characteristics this institution would have to have. He merely stated that “it could act where the UN fails to act”.

Is any need felt for a new intergovernmental organization? Those who propose it are thinking of cases in which the democratic countries feel the need to use force and the Security Council is not in a position to approve a resolution owing to the opposition of China or Russia. In such a situation, it might prove useful to ensure legitimacy through the establishment of an institution comprising only democratic countries. While there is no lack of intergovernmental institutions, none of the existing ones seem to be sufficiently effective: NATO is restricted to the countries on both shores of the Atlantic and does not include important countries like Japan and Australia, while the G7 comprises only a small number of governments.

And yet, the proposal arouses some concern, even among the most enthusiastic champions of democracy. After eight years of George W. Bush’s presidency, seven years of war in Afghanistan, and five years of war in Iraq, many wonder what the consequences will be for the international scenario if a new Republican president is elected. Within the Republican Party there has always been a clash between pragmatists and messianists, above all in the area of foreign policy. If McCain were to become the 44th President of the United States, would he tilt more towards Henry Kissinger’s pragmatism, or would he rekindle the neo-con ideological fervor of Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld? Ever since the Party selected its candidate, the internal factions have tended to try and draw McCain to their own side.

The idea of a League of Democracies somehow appears to be a compromise between pragmatism and messianism. On the one hand, it actually suggests that the powerful although not omnipresent United States is prepared to refrain from the use of force in the absence of the consent of the other democratic states. This is an important concession granted to multilateralism and distinguishes McCain from the policies of his party companion, Bush. On the other, it does not mean that the United States must give up the idea of continuing to carrying out their mission of catechizing peoples for freedom and democracy.

It is not surprising, therefore, that a neo-con such as Robert Kagan has applauded vociferously. The proposal for a League of Democracies is, however, bipartisan, as it is supported also by several advisors to Barack Obama such as Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay. However, while the proposal can rely on supporters among both the Democrats and the Republicans, there is no lack of resistance to it

in both camps. As Thomas Carothers claims, there is some reason to doubt whether a League of Democracies could defend American interests, while it would have the effect of annoying trade partners such as China and many Middle East countries.

## **A League of Democracies today**

The proposed League of Democracies is based on a theoretical assumption, namely that democratic governments share principles that allow them also to harmonize their foreign policy decisions. However, this optimistic theory has been dismantled in various ways by the most influential current of international thinking – the realist current. For realists, all states, whether democratic or despotic, have as their sole aim to increase their power and security. When they play the role of political advisors, realist thinkers become pragmatic and adopt Deng Xiaoping’s logic: “I don't care if it's a white cat or a black cat. It's a good cat so long as it catches mice”.

After the fall of the Berlin wall, those who believe that the nature of the internal regime is capable of influencing foreign policy again plucked up courage. It is never completely clear whether they, labeled as “idealists” in the field of international relations, are the champions of a fact (that is: democratic countries *have* a more virtuous foreign policy than the despotic ones) or are merely wishful thinkers (that is: democratic countries *should* have a virtuous foreign policy). And, as we shall see, this ambiguity persists in the proposal for a League of Democracies.

What are the possible effects of a League of Democracies? Let us examine the principal examples of international conflicts over the past twenty years. The 1991 Gulf War, essentially waged by the United States with the military support of the NATO countries, was approved by the Security Council, with the favorable vote of Russia and the approval of China. The humanitarian intervention announced by George Bush Sr. in 1992 in Somalia was applauded by the entire Security Council. The intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 received a unanimous consensus.

This brings us at last to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the event that more than any other split the international community. The war did not receive the approval of the Security Council, despite the huge pressure brought to bear by the United States. For the Republican Party, this was an exemplary case of the United Nations being “unable to act”. And yet, the Republicans overlook the fact that it was not only China and Russia that were against the war but also and above all such consolidated democracies as France and Germany. In other words, it was not a split between authoritarian and democratic countries, but also within the democratic countries themselves. The same split occurred inside the United States: one half of public opinion was against the war, especially if it was to be waged without the approval of the Security Council. This split still persists after a good five years of war and the two 2008 presidential candidates faithfully reflect the camps for and against the war.

On only one occasion, the intervention in Kosovo in 1999, was there a convergence of opinion between the democratic countries in the face of opposition from Russia and China. This was the era of the Clinton presidency during which, in view of the impossibility of obtaining the go-ahead from the Security Council, and in concert with the European countries, NATO approval had to suffice. But, is it necessary to attribute Russia’s firm opposition to the uncertain nature of its own political regime, which is only partially democratic, or rather to the cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious ties between it and Serbia? Now, nearly ten years after the intervention, and in view of the continuing instability in the region, the question to be asked is whether the decision of the democratic countries was the most reasonable and whether there was greater wisdom in the strategy championed by Russia involving the use of political and diplomatic pressure.

It is even more instructive to examine the principal military interventions which, although requested, *were never actually implemented*. Non-implemented military actions include Rwanda in 1994, the former Yugoslavia in 1993, Burma over more than one decade, and Darfur starting in 2005. In these cases, there was never a unanimous determination on the part of the democracies to intervene, which

was restrained by opposition from some authoritarian country. The Security Council would gladly have approved intervention by a “coalition of the willing” if only someone had been willing to provide the required resources and run the necessary risks. And so, it is false to claim that the United Nations cannot act because of an alleged divergence between the democratic countries and the despotic ones.

### **Who deserves to be called democratic?**

Which countries deserve membership of a League of Democracies? Democracy is a challengeable form of government and it is not always easy to rate how democratic a polity is. It is indeed true that it is possible to reach an agreement in practice that one fails to reach in theory, although it is not easy to establish rules of membership. This is a familiar problem in the European Union which, in the course of its half century of life, has expanded from the six original countries to as many as twenty-seven member countries. And many of the negotiations involving the enlargement to the southern European countries between 1974 and 1984 and to the eastern European countries between 1990 and 2005 hinged precisely on the assessment of the internal level of democracy.

Robert Kagan suggested that “A new league of nations could simply borrow the EU’s admissions form”. And yet, if only the EU criteria were applied the United States would not be admitted to the League: no country in which the death penalty is in force has been admitted to the EU. This example is sufficient to show how complicated it is to lay down agreed criteria of democracy.

### **From being to having to be**

But, perhaps the proponents of a League of Democracies disagree that a convergence of view already exists among the liberal countries or that this convergence could be precisely the result of being a member of a common institution. In other words, the proposal does not arise out of the fact that democracies actually have a virtuous foreign policy, but rather from the fact that it could be virtuous if they had a reserved drawing room where they could reciprocally moderate their own excesses and cultivate their own virtues. It is perhaps hoped that a new League, by strengthening ties, could ultimately lead to democracies ceasing to commit hostile acts against each other, such as those that in 1973 led the US government to support a coup d’état against the elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile.

However, it is odd that this proposal should today be on the lips of a Republican presidential candidate if we think how far the present administration has shifted the United States away from the majority of countries with a consolidated democracy. Multilateral Environmental Agreements, the International Criminal Court, the Mine Ban Treaty, and rules governing the death penalty are all acts that have led to the paths followed by the democratic countries becoming separated. On the one hand, we almost always find the European countries, Canada, and Australia walking hand in hand; on the other, the United States. Perhaps Senator McCain believes that a League of Democracies could be an instrument of US foreign policy, but in the end he might discover that it would have the opposite effect and that a group of democratic countries acting in concert could hobble US foreign policy. One wonders whether the United States would be willing to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and subscribe to the International Criminal Court at the request of a League of Democracies. And what if the same League were actually to ask the United States to amend its domestic legislation and abolish the death penalty or shut down the base of Guantanamo once and for all?

A criticism of the idea of a League of Democracies in no way means that today it is not necessary to enforce democratic norms and values also in the global system. Democracy has succeeded in distributing substantial benefits to the inhabitants of the democratic countries. In the older democracies, the inhabitant benefited from a dividend in terms of income, life expectancy, personal security, and many other things. Today, many other peoples in the world are endeavoring to emulate them, in the face of internal difficulties. The present-day challenge consists precisely in grasping

these benefits of democracy in the global sphere as well.

## **Support and promote democratization from within**

On a great many occasions over the past twenty years or so, we have witnessed actual electoral processions in which peoples that for decades had been deprived of the right to choose their own leader lined up in an orderly fashion to exercise the sacred right of democracy – free elections. Countries with a consolidated democracy, which are also those that today can boast of having the greatest economic and political resources, share the responsibility of offering their own model to the despotically governed peoples. But what methods should they use?

The strategy of exporting democracy by coercive means tried out in Afghanistan and in Iraq has failed. In spite of the bloodthirsty regimes of the Taleban and Saddam Hussein, in neither of these countries did a general consensus evolve in favor of democratic power. To aim at the isolation of certain states, as is implicit in a League of Democracies, would render the democratization process even more difficult. The populations excluded might decide to become more radicalized, perhaps uniting under the national banner, even when waved by their oppressors. Take the case of Iran: the policy of isolation has so far had the sole effect of strengthening the position of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Much more could instead be obtained through dialogue, particularly if this is not limited to governments and diplomatic channels, but endeavors to involve the citizens. There is no need for any further intergovernmental organization: if anything, the existing ones should be opened to transnational associations, to the representatives of civil society, and to the citizens themselves. In Europe, much was learned from the Cold War experience: to a much greater degree than by the euro-missiles, the Soviet regime was worn down by the increasing contacts between citizens of the East and those of the West. Today, history may be repeating itself also in China and in the Middle East, in Burma and in Africa.

If anything, note should be taken of how few efforts the democratic countries are making in this direction. Development aid has decreased and is still today coupled with a pragmatic assessment of the countries' alignment rather than an analysis of the respective merits of political systems. The United Nations already have a Fund for Democracy, which continues to be dramatically underfinanced and underutilized: with a financial commitment of less than 100 million dollars, any contribution it may make is essentially only symbolic.

## **For the democratization of the global system**

It would be a mistake to think that the democratic challenge of our age must be directed only towards the interior. The idea of a League of Democracies is not addressed solely to solving the problem of how to democratize the global system. Today, it is necessary to regain the moral high ground lost by the West as a result of the invasion of Iraq. To achieve this, the democratic countries must courageously show a willingness to apply the principles on which their internal system is based to the global sphere. The following is a list of some of the actions that could be pursued by the democratic countries.

First, bring the Official Development Assistance contributions into line with the commitments underwritten by the donor countries (all democratic!) in 2000. Second, enforce the environmental pollution parameters set up by the Kyoto Protocol and, for those countries that dodged them, confirm their commitment. Third, coordination among the democratic countries in the UN and the other international organizations, explicitly justifying why certain choices are consistent with democratic principles. Fourth, unilaterally accept the compulsory jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice as a means for resolving international disputes. Fifth, become a member of the International Criminal Court and support its action. And finally, promote the establishment of a World Parliament

elected by universal suffrage, as a symbolic institution able to coordinate political choices.

To do this, it is not necessary to have a new intergovernmental organization: all the above actions can be performed unilaterally or jointly inside the United Nations. And if the democratic governments of the West really wanted to move in this direction, it would provide the ultimate proof that the idealists are right and that the democracies can decide to have a virtuous foreign policy.

## Conclusions

In the hands of John McCain, the idea of a League of Democracies is a propaganda gimmick to reassure an American public opinion that is increasingly discontented with the unilateralism of Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld. However, the proposal throws into relief some important issues regarding the democracies' foreign policy, and in particular that of the most powerful democratic nation, the United States. Whichever of the two candidates becomes the new occupant of the White House, he cannot afford to disregard two issues:

What can and must the democratic countries do to consolidate democracy in the countries that are still not democratic? And is it possible to extend some of the principles and values of democracy also to the global system?

I have answered both questions affirmatively and enthusiastically. I have also claimed that, rather than venture into new institutions that would only increase the divisions, the democratic countries should learn to use existing ones more effectively, starting from the UN. Nothing prevents the UN from more actively promoting democracy in the member countries and from itself becoming a democratic organization. Often, the obstacles do not come from the despotic countries but above all from the democratic countries. In order to further the cause of democratization, both internal and international, it can only be hoped that the next occupant of the White House will radically change course. And the proposal for a League of Democracies made by Senator John McCain points in the direction of a change of course vis-à-vis the presidency of George W. Bush, although one which ultimately leads to a dead end.

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