



How To Bring the World's Democracies Together

A Global Summit of Democracies

By Michael H. Fuchs

Following the damage the Trump administration has inflicted on America's democracy and on its role as a supporter of democracy around the world, the incoming Biden administration must move quickly to address the situation by placing values at the heart of U.S. foreign policy. One of the first steps in this effort—beginning in early 2021—should be to create a select group of the world's democracies that can forge a more sustained, coordinated approach to the greatest challenges faced by democracies today. This group of democratic nations should be led by the United States and include, at the very least, the other G-7 members plus South Korea and Australia—and possibly other developing democracies as well. In 2022, with this expanded group of democracies at the core, the United States should then plan to organize a larger summit of the world's democracies to encourage all democracies to help one another and work together on shared global challenges.

Democracy is under threat

Democracy around the world is under threat. From the United States to the Philippines, from Brazil to Hungary, democratic institutions around the world have been eroded in recent years by illiberal leaders. Xenophobic backlashes against immigration, economic inequality, and the rapid spread of disinformation are just some of the significant challenges that are driving this surge in populism and decreased faith in government institutions.

America can and must do better—not only at home but also in supporting democracies around the world. In addition to its moral value, the United States has two interests in supporting other democracies: First, democracies have a tendency to strengthen and erode in waves, linking the fate of democracy in the United States to its fate elsewhere. Second, democratic nations have an interest in working together on key global challenges in ways that advance values shared across democracies.

While each democracy is unique, the fate of democracy across different countries is connected. After World War II and again as the Cold War faded, waves of democracy swept across the world, with dozens of countries democratizing.¹ More recently, the “color revolutions” in post-Soviet states and the uprisings in the Middle East during the Arab Spring showed how easily popular democratic movements can spread. But democratic backsliding can also occur in waves, as Europe today makes clear, with democratic erosion occurring in Hungary and Poland and far-right parties rising in Italy, the Netherlands, France, and beyond.² In 2020, Freedom House recorded the 14th consecutive year of an overall decline in freedom around the world.³ Today, the easy spread of disinformation, coupled with shared transnational challenges such as migration, reinforces just how intertwined many of these democracies are.

In addition to democracies working together to protect their democratic institutions, it is increasingly vital for them to coordinate on all manner of strategic, economic, and security issues. Whether faced with China’s theft of intellectual property⁴ or Russia’s disinformation campaigns,⁵ democracies must come together to defend international rules and norms. While democratic countries do not agree with one another on everything, the values they do share must be the foundation on which to build more robust cooperation.

By working with a broad range of democracies from around the world, the United States can learn from the widest possible array of governments and actors to determine what works best in tackling the challenges facing the country today. Following the Trump era, this kind of humility will not only be necessary, it will be refreshing for America’s partners abroad. And, of course, America will need to be serious about repairing and strengthening its own democracy.

For these reasons, a new Biden administration should immediately set out to build a stronger global network of democracies that can act in partnership with one another.

Convene a coordinating group of leading democracies in 2021

This effort should begin with the organization of a small, core set of democracies that are likely to be aligned on key issues and have the capacity to drive global actions on shared priorities.

There is growing agreement that while the G-7 is a valuable mechanism, the United States would benefit from regular coordination with a wider set of democracies likely to play bigger roles in promoting democracy and coordinating on global issues in the future. To this end, the United States should convene a group comprised of the G-7 countries plus Australia and South Korea—the latter two countries being natural partners since they are U.S. treaty allies aligned with the United States and G-7 countries on many central issues, and their large economies make them important regional and global players.

Meanwhile, representatives from institutions such as the European Union and NATO should participate as observers. This expanded G-7 model would augment the robust coordination of the world's most prosperous democracies.

In addition, the United States should consider adding countries such as Brazil, India, and South Africa to this expanded G-7. These nations are key players in their regions and are major developing democracies with sizable economies and some of the largest populations on earth. Expanding the G-7 to include these and other developing economies could build stronger alignment between G-7 countries and key democracies that may not always line up strategically with the “West.” Certainly, the current leadership of Brazil and India might be problematic in promoting liberal democratic values because of actions the ruling parties in those countries have taken in recent years to undermine democratic norms; but even still, these two countries are important to the project of knitting the world's biggest democracies closer together. Most importantly, while Brazil and India may not agree with the United States on a variety of global strategic questions, they share democratic values—Freedom House ranks them both as “free.”⁶ Accordingly, the United States should make an effort to engage more with these countries as democracies. Including nations such as Brazil, India, South Africa, and others would be a recognition that one of the main goals of the group is to try to forge more agreement with developing democracies on global challenges, even if it comes at the cost of a certain level of initial agreement by the group.

This focused group of democracies would strive to forge consensus on how to approach controversial issues such as dealing with specific challenges emanating from China and determine the concrete steps that democracies should take together. This smaller grouping—as opposed to a very large assemblage—would also make it easier to avoid the question of whether to invite clearly backsliding democracies such as Hungary and Turkey. And, if successful, this mechanism could become a new, sustained G-7-style group, helping key democracies to consult with one another on pressing challenges and to coordinate their actions.

Prepare for a larger summit of the world's democracies in early 2022

Once the United States has effectively organized this expanded G-7 mechanism, it should then work with that group to organize a global summit in 2022 that would include all of the world's democracies. In order to send the right message to the world and spark sustained cooperation among democracies, a global summit of this type would have to include the right group of countries and nongovernmental actors, which presents a challenge. It is difficult to determine exactly which countries are “democracies,” and as a consequence, the invite lists to an event such as this would inevitably be the subject of strenuous debate among the organizers and could be influenced by factors other than a particular country's democratic credentials. That said, the process of determining which countries to invite itself could be a useful exercise, helping to hash out U.S. approaches to backsliding democracies and sending signals to those countries about why they are or are not being invited.

There are two divergent options worth considering while organizing this larger, global summit of democracies:

1. **Community of Democracies:** The Community of Democracies (CoD)—a 20-year-old organization dedicated to bringing democracies together to support one another—has been underutilized but still holds potential. This global intergovernmental coalition is run by a smaller group of countries that comprise the “governing council,” which represents all regions.⁷ While the CoD typically convenes biannual ministerial meetings, in recent years, the governing council has become the beating heart of the organization. It drives its day-to-day activities, discusses shared challenges, and organizes activities on everything from navigating the intersection of technology and democracy to sending teams to transitioning democracies to analyze and provide recommendations on how other democracies can best help.

There are numerous advantages to organizing the summit in conjunction with the CoD. For one, the CoD has representation from all regions and countries at varying stages of democratic development. In addition, it already has a protocol for inviting countries and also invites nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from around the world to participate in aspects of its gatherings, which ensures that representatives from outside of government also have a seat at the table.

However, a major obstacle would be the presence of backsliding democracies—including Hungary, Poland, and Mali—on the governing council. If the United States chooses to work with the CoD on a summit, it would have to use the process to ensure that every state is committed to taking certain steps to improve their democracy as the price of entry for the summit (see more on this below), which would force leaders to either show their commitment to democracy in tangible ways or not attend.

2. **Ad hoc summit:** The second option for a larger summit would involve the United States organizing the summit on its own. Similar to how it organized the first Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) in 2010,⁸ the United States could determine the invitation list—using whichever criteria it wants—and set the agenda. This approach would give the United States maximum flexibility in driving the process, avoiding the need to compromise with other countries when determining who should be invited and what issues should be covered at the summit. Moreover, the notion of a one-time summit—as opposed to yet another ongoing process of meetings—could be appealing to other countries.

The potential downside to this ad hoc approach is that it would require more effort from the United States, and it would be up to the United States to establish a process for following through on the summit. The NSS was hosted four times before the process ended in 2016, with two other countries agreeing to host biannual summits after the initial one—and the United States hosting the fourth and final summit.

The incoming Biden administration could consider a similar approach, having a few other countries agree to hosting follow-up summits. However, this process would be unlikely to yield a sustainable, robust mechanism for ongoing coordination among democracies. Moreover, after the distinctly undemocratic actions of the Trump administration, organizing a summit in which the United States alone determines what nation is a “democracy” could be received poorly by some democracies.

Whatever the process for inviting countries, credible NGOs, from all regions, that are committed to advancing democracy—for example, the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute from the United States, as well as the Copenhagen-based Alliance of Democracies—should also be invited to the summit.

Protect democracies and coordinate on global challenges

The first aim of a democracy summit should be to send a powerful signal about the United States’ intention to prioritize support for democracy and to stress the importance for the world’s democracies to stand together at a time of global uncertainty and rising populism and authoritarianism. A summit could achieve two goals: 1) secure specific, immediate steps—or deliverables—that democracies can take to protect democracy around the world; and 2) establish an ongoing agenda and mechanism for democracies to cooperate on global challenges.

1. Secure deliverables

One goal of the summit would be to encourage countries to take concrete actions to shore up their own democracies and support one another. Similar to the series of biannual NSSs held by the Obama administration, in which countries came with promises to secure nuclear materials and take steps to counter proliferation, such commitments would ensure that the democracy summit yields tangible progress while also establishing a bar that countries looking to participate would need to meet.

These commitments could address a wide range of issues, such as increasing transparency in government operations, attacking corruption, and protecting democratic institutions from foreign interference. Meanwhile, the summit could focus on a specific set of issues—for instance, the intersection of democracy and technology or, more broadly, how democracies can support one another. A summit could aim to be both a forcing mechanism for countries to announce and highlight policies intended to improve their own democracies, while also being a catalyst for countries to develop solutions together on the sidelines of the summit.

2. Establish mechanisms for ongoing coordination

The summit should also launch an ongoing process of more regular coordination among democracies. In addition to the expanded G-7 mechanism, this larger summit could produce a road map outlining a vision for how all democracies can most effectively work together, both to support democracy and to coordinate on strategic issues.

This road map should include specific steps that democracies can take together in order to play a more robust role on everything from inclusive growth to climate change and to commit each country to investing in this new process to carry forward the commitments made at the summit. Issues to be addressed in this road map could include, but are not limited to, the following issues:

- **Technology:** As democracies grapple with how best to balance the values of an open society with some of the growing dangers posed by malicious actors on cyberspace—from disinformation to cyberattacks—this gathering, paired with an ongoing process of democratic cooperation, should provide a venue for democracies to share lessons and develop common approaches.
- **Coordination within multilateral institutions:** As China and other nondemocratic countries have sought to erode international norms, they have used their influence on multilateral institutions to stop action on various human rights issues. Democracies should find ways to band together within multilateral institutions to push back against autocrats and stand up for democratic values. This process of democratic coordination can provide a key opportunity to develop shared approaches within multilateral institutions.

Host the global summit of democracies in 2022

The United States should host this larger global summit at some point in 2022, which would allow time for the incoming Biden administration to first take steps to strengthen and improve American democracy in the wake of the Trump administration's undermining of democratic institutions. Doing so would lend more credibility to U.S. efforts to organize a global summit of democracies. Similarly, a summit in 2022 would allow more time for countries to improve responses to the pandemic and increase the possibility for an in-person summit.

Conclusion

Of course, there are obstacles and potential downsides to a global democracy summit. The United States would have to make decisions about which nations are and are not democracies, which carries the risk of offending key partners. Moreover, to ensure that a democracy summit has true lasting impact, it is incumbent on the United States to work closely with other democracies to find a mechanism—or mechanisms—that can sustain the kind of cooperation that the United States hopes to produce. However, the actions described above can serve as initial steps to help spark a broader, long-term commitment on behalf of the world's democracies to partnering more closely together.

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Endnotes

- 1 The notion of democratization coming in waves was popularized by Samuel Huntington. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
- 2 BBC News, "Europe and right-wing nationalism: A country-by-country guide," November 13, 2019, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006>.
- 3 Sarah Repucci, "Freedom in the World: 2020" (Washington: Freedom House), available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy> (last accessed November 2020).
- 4 David Sanger and Steven Lee Myers, "After a Hiatus, China Accelerates Cyberspying Efforts to Obtain U.S. Technology," *The New York Times*, November 29, 2018, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/us/politics/china-trump-cyberespionage.html>.
- 5 Julian Barnes and David Sanger, "Russian Intelligence Agencies Push Disinformation on Pandemic," *The New York Times*, July 28, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/28/us/politics/russia-disinformation-coronavirus.html>.
- 6 Freedom House, "Countries and Territories: Global Freedom Scores," available at <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores> (last accessed November 2020).
- 7 The CoD governing council is currently comprised of the following countries: Argentina, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Guatemala, Hungary, India, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Mali, Mexico, Mongolia, Morocco, Nigeria, Norway, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, the Republic of Korea, Romania, Sweden, the United States, Uruguay, and the United Kingdom. See Community of Democracies, "Governing Council," available at <https://community-democracies.org/values/governing-council/> (last accessed November 2020).
- 8 Kelsey Davenport, "Nuclear Security Summit at a Glance" (Washington: Arms Control Association, 2018), available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/NuclearSecurity-Summit>.