

AMERICAN DEMOCRACY PROMOTION RELOADED: THE SUMMIT FOR DEMOCRACY AND ITS INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL REVERBERATIONS

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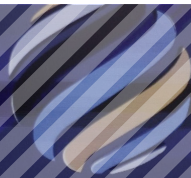
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SUMMIT FOR DEMOCRACY



Contents

ABSTRACT	6
INTRODUCTION	7
A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY	8
THE SUMMIT FOR DEMOCRACY: STATED RATIONALE AND GOALS	10
WATERED-DOWN RHETORIC	12
THE POLITICS OF INVITATION: INS AND OUTS	14
DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS AT THE CENTER?	19
THE AFTERMATH OF THE SUMMIT	21
REACTIONS FROM CHINA AND RUSSIA: CONTEST OF MODELS	22
REVERBERATIONS OF THE SUMMIT IN THE MIDDLE EAST	27
CONCLUSION	30
ENDNOTES	33
ABOUT AL SHARQ STRATEGIC RESEARCH	40

ABSTRACT

One of the defining characteristics of current international politics is the decline of the relative power of the United States and the erosion of the post-war liberal international order it spearheaded. On December 9-10, 2021, the United States organized a two-day virtual global summit, The Summit for Democracy, with the stated goals of engendering tangible reforms to push back authoritarianism, protect human rights, and fight corruption. This research paper analyzes this summit as an American attempt to reclaim the post-war international order and the American primacy in it as well as to corner the rising tide of right-wing populism within American domestic political landscape. To do so, the paper first situates the summit within the broader trajectory of US democracy promotion and then discusses the content of the summit as well as the reasons for the unusually watered-down rhetoric the US had to adopt in it. It then broaches the entangled politics of why some countries were invited by the US and others were not; and the political calculations that went into the decision to not attend on the part of some invited countries. The paper then turns to various receptions of the summit inside and outside the US. In that vein, it questions the role democracy and human rights plays in the Biden administration's foreign policy and discusses the limitations and risks, as well as the anticipated gains, of dividing countries along regime types. The paper then provides an analysis of the Chinese and Russian reactions to the summit by drawing on their official declarations and on media sources. It finally documents the reception of the summit in the Middle East—the least represented region in the event. The paper concludes by evaluating the broader implications of the summit for international relations.

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Introduction

On December 9-10, 2021, the United States organized a two-day global summit, The Summit for Democracy, which was held online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The United States (US) invited 110 countries to participate in the summit, in addition to the President of the European Commission, the United Nations Secretary-General, and several civil society actors, journalists, business and labor leaders. Some 100 governments accepted the invitation and made their official interventions at the summit. The conference was meant to be the kick-off event for what it dubbed “a year of action,” whereby countries will commit and carry out significant tangible reforms to fight corruption, push back authoritarianism, and protect human rights. A second summit will meet toward the end of 2022 to follow up on the first summit, this time in person.

It is an interesting time to hold a global summit in the name of democracy, as debates rage over the decline and even demise of the liberal international order, the increasing turmoil in Western democracies, and the rise of China and Russia along with their growing promotion of their autocratic models of governance. Why then did the United States organize this summit? What were the summit’s stated aims and what is the likelihood they will be attained? In what ways was this summit different from other democracy promotion policies of the previous American administrations? How was the summit received both inside and outside the US? More specifically, how did China and Russia, the two main targets of the event, respond? How was the summit received in the Middle East—the least represented region in the event? What were the political calculations that went into the decision to extend invitations to some countries and not invite others? In the same vein, what were the politics involved in some countries’ decision to not attend the summit despite being invited?

This paper sets out to provide answers to these questions and concludes with an overall evaluation of the summit and of its chances for achieving its stated goals. It argues that the Summit for Democracy is the Biden administration’s attempt to normatively and institutionally reclaim the liberal international order, to reinstitute American primacy through reviving alliances and pressuring opponents, and to drive the nascent populist wave of ‘Trumpism’ into a corner in American domestic politics.

A Brief Overview of Democracy Promotion in American Foreign Policy

Democracy promotion refers to all kinds of governmental, quasi-governmental, and non-governmental initiatives to foster democratic transitions in autocratic countries and to consolidate democratic norms and institutions in places where democracy has newly taken root or is recovering from a breakdown. The United States has a long history of employing democracy promotion in foreign policy discourse and practice as some observers point out that the “democratist crusade” has been a continuous thread throughout the nation’s history.¹ Most famously, Woodrow Wilson referred to the goal of “making the world safe for democracy” to justify America’s declaration of war against Germany in the First World War.² However, democracy promotion was present in American foreign policy discourse even before Wilson. “To be safe,” proclaimed the American President Theodore Roosevelt, “democracy must kill its enemy when it can and where it can. The world cannot be half democratic and half autocratic.”³ In the interwar era, Franklin D. Roosevelt was indifferent to the rise of totalitarian dictatorships until around 1936, after which he adopted a moralistic rhetoric in depicting the US role as being to defend democratic values and institutions worldwide.

During the Cold War, the US main aim was to contain the Soviet Union, which naturally did not support democracy at home or abroad. American administrations operated under the banner of “defending the free world” against the “red threat,” which to a large extent justified support for autocratic allies and the undermining of democratic governments if they leaned closer to the Soviet Union. In that period, the United States engaged in buttressing anti-communist dictatorships and overthrowing many democratically elected governments—most prominently, among many others, Operation Ajax against Mohammad Mosaddeq in Iran in 1953⁴ and the Pinochet-led coup against Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973.⁵ While the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration did not link democracy promotion and national security together, John F. Kennedy sought to channel nationalist movements in the Third World toward democracy and away from communism. Yet, Cold War realpolitik ultimately carried the day, which was clearly articulated in Kennedy’s statements in 1961 on the assassination of Rafael Trujillo, the Dominican Republic’s dictatorial leader: “There are three possibilities in descending order of preference: a decent democratic regime, a continuation of the Trujillo regime (a dictatorship), or a Castro regime (a communist government). We ought to aim at the first, but we really can’t denounce the second until we are sure that we can avoid the third.” The Nixon administration, under the leadership of Henry Kissinger, took a deliberate approach to not take considerations of democracy and human rights into account in their dealings with foreign governments. This on the one hand enabled them to achieve rapprochement with China and détente with Soviet Union. Yet it also brought about hardline policies that supported right-wing dictatorships and undermined democratically elected left-wing governments in Latin America and elsewhere.

Jimmy Carter proclaimed that he rejected the “amoral” aspects of foreign policy under détente and gave a central role to the policy of promoting human rights and democracy. He declared his position in a December 1978 speech: “We are free of the inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear.” Yet, Carter also had to reconcile his vision with entrenched US security and economic interests as he overlooked the repression of authoritarian regimes in various countries, most prominently in Shah’s Iran. Ronald Reagan endorsed democracy promotion under the rubric of civil society assistance as a foreign policy priority with bipartisan support. In 1983, he established the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a government-funded organization to support democratic reforms across the world, as part of his “Campaign for Democracy.” However, the ‘Reagan doctrine’ promised US support for all sorts of regimes and movements against the Soviet Union, including dictatorships in the Philippines and Chad, guerilla movements in Nicaragua and Angola, and the apartheid regime in South Africa.

The United States capitalized on the end of the Cold War and the ensuing “unipolar moment”⁶ as the moment of democracy promotion especially in the Eastern European and post-Soviet region. In the 1980s, Michael Doyle, an international relations scholar, developed the ‘democratic peace’ hypothesis which posited that democracies rarely if ever fight with each other. The argument rose to prominence in academic circles in 1990s, so much so that another international relations scholar referred to it as “the closest thing we have to an empirical law in the study of international relations.”⁷ The ‘democratic peace’ theory then “moved from the classroom to the corridors of American power”⁸ in the 1990s, becoming “an axiom of US foreign policy.”⁹ This was well reflected in President Bill Clinton’s State of the Union Address in 1994, where he argued that “the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere,” because, “democracies don’t attack each other.”¹⁰

Notably, the Middle East was not very present in the radar of such democracy promotion activities. Its turn came with the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001. In the aftermath of the attacks, the Bush administration sought to justify its unilateral and internationally unauthorized war on Iraq under the pretext of bringing democracy to Iraq and to the region. This so-called “Freedom Agenda” rested on the recognition that decades of support for autocratic allies had made the United States less secure, hence democracy promotion was presented as a national security strategy.¹¹ In his inauguration speech for his second term in 2005, G.W. Bush tied American national security interests to the promotion of freedom and democracy: “The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is

the expansion of freedom in all the world.” The idea of promoting democracy in the Middle East, however, was quickly abandoned after the strong show of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 2005 Egyptian elections and Hamas’s coming to power through elections in 2006. As a result, the Bush administration deeply tarnished the reputation of democracy promotion policies in the Middle East as being nothing more than a ruse to cover militaristic policies and subversive diplomacy. Hence, to mark the rupture with the previous administration, the Obama administration took a decidedly more reserved approach to the idea of democracy promotion. The Trump presidency, on the other hand, was a deathblow to the institutional resources of democracy promotion and to whatever credibility and moral authority the United States was left with to lead such policies.

Now democracy promotion seems to be making a strong rhetorical comeback with the incoming Biden administration. On the campaign trail, Joe Biden, who had been suspicious of democracy promotion policies,¹² despite his support for the Iraq War,¹³ promised to put democracy and human rights at the heart of his foreign policy. This summit comes off as a fulfilment of this promise and the flagship event of his administration.

The Summit for Democracy: Stated Rationale and Goals

When the idea of a global summit for democracy started to circulate, some embraced it enthusiastically by referring to the fight for protecting and promoting democracy as the ultimate call of our time. Others have been critical of it as unproductive or even counterproductive, suggesting that a summit for all democracies might not be the best strategy despite the worthy goal.¹⁴ China and Russia, two major powers who were left outside the summit and indeed were its principal targets, as well as their allies and even some of the uninvited US allies, harshly criticized the event.

Halting global democratic backslide and protecting existing democracies was one of the core pledges of Joe Biden’s electoral campaign. Biden laid out his foreign policy vision in an article titled, “Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump,” which he published in *Foreign Affairs* journal in 2020 while still a candidate. There, Biden talks about democracy both as an aspired value and a strategic goal through which the United States should pursue its interests in international relations. The article argues that the Trump presidency abdicated American leadership and strained American alliances with its traditional democratic friends, instead seeking to forge shady alliances with autocrats and dictators that emboldened them and harmed American interests globally. The article then calls for reclaiming American interests through revitalizing these battered alliances.

Democracy is key to this story. Democracy not only unifies the US as a people, Biden claims, but also “gives strength to [the American] nation.”¹⁵ Trump’s presidency undermined democracy at home and abroad, and the new administration should “rescue US foreign policy” by strengthening democracy domestically and internationally. He promised to “put strengthening democracy back on the global agenda.” This is a call to renew the US democracy promotion agenda once more, but this time in a different register and under different circumstances. The US State Department characterizes the summit as “a flagship presidential initiative that illustrates the Biden-Harris Administration’s commitment to putting democracy and human rights at the heart of U.S. foreign policy.”¹⁶

In his first major speech as Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken pointed out that democracy promotion for the US is not a question of if, but how.¹⁷ This time, he argued, the US would not promote democracy through “costly military interventions or by attempting to overthrow authoritarian regimes by force.” “We have tried these tactics in the past,” he stated, but “however well intentioned, they haven’t worked.” Rather, the US would now use “the power of its example,” “incentivize democratic behavior,” and “encourage others to make key reforms, overturn bad laws, fight corruption, and stop unjust practices.” Blinken then explains that it is in American national interests to promote democracy abroad: “Because strong democracies are more stable, more open, better partners to us, more committed to human rights, less prone to conflict, and more dependable markets for our goods and services.” On the other hand, “when democracies are weak, governments can’t deliver for their people or a country becomes so polarized that it’s hard for anything to get done, they become more vulnerable to extremist movements from the inside and to interference from the outside. And they become less reliable partners to the United States. None of that is in our national interest.”¹⁸

On that basis, Biden promised to “repair and reinvigorate” democracy at home and abroad. To do so, he pledged to “organize and host a global Summit for Democracy to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the free world” in his first year in office. The goal of this summit would be to “strengthen [American] democratic institutions, honestly confront nations that are backsliding, and forge a common agenda.” This summit would not simply be a photo op, he argued, but will have a concrete and practical agenda.

In that vein, the summit had three major declared goals: defending against authoritarianism, addressing and fighting corruption, and promoting respect for human rights. In order to prevent the event from turning into yet another high-profile occasion where leaders indulge themselves in lofty rhetoric about the virtues of democracy while not backing it up in practice, the organizers asked the invited leaders to announce concrete policy initiatives and reforms to defend democracy and human rights in their respective countries and abroad, especially with respect to these three fields.

During the summit, Biden himself talked about various policy measures he had already undertaken. In that context, he mentioned the American Rescue Plan, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and the Build Back Better plan as examples of policy actions that prove that democracies can deliver. He referred to his executive order on National Strategy on Gender Equality and Equity as well as policy steps on worker unionization and voter registration as initiatives to enhance human rights, and his Strategy on Countering Corruption initiative as the American attempt to fight transnational corruption and to improve transparency. He also announced the launching of the new Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal with a 224 million USD budget for foreign assistance to bolster democratic resilience and human rights globally. He particularly mentioned the establishment of a new multilateral initiative, the International Fund for Public Media Interest, to support independent media and the new Defamation Defense Fund for Journalists to protect investigative journalists around the world through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Watered-down Rhetoric

It is worth noting that this time the American rhetoric of democracy promotion was distinctively humbler compared to the past three decades. Two main factors stand out as the reasons for this humility. First is the recognition that the foreign policy legacy of the Bush-era aggressive militarism in the name of democracy promotion has tarnished the reputation of the entire endeavor. In the summit, the Biden administration instead declared that it “hopes to protect or preserve democracy where it already exists,”¹⁹ seeking to avoid the missionary zeal of spreading democracy globally.

The second reason for the humbler rhetoric is the ineluctable recognition of the internal deficiencies of American democracy that lead many to argue that the US is not in a position to lead the world on the issue of democracy. In other words, the rhetoric of ‘American exceptionalism’ is gone. Indeed, many independent indexes of democracy highlight the troubles within American democracy. For example, The Economist Intelligence Unit downgraded American democracy to the status of a “flawed democracy” even before Trump was elected.²⁰ The co-founder and the executive director of the Black Voters Matter Fund

captures the American dilemma succinctly: “You can’t try to export and defend democracy globally when you can’t protect it domestically. You can’t be the global fireman when your house is on fire.”²¹

American democracy has always had large structural problems; the power of big capital in campaign finance, gerrymandering, racial injustice, and voting rights restrictions are only some of them. But more recently, American democracy has faced further significant setbacks. The storming of the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021 by far-right groups was considered an ‘attempted coup’ by the Cline Center’s Coup D’etat Project.²² The Republican Party has still not issued an unequivocal acceptance of the results of the 2020 elections, and most Republicans believe that the election was stolen from Trump²³—all of which add up to the undermining of one of the core norms of democratic competition. In the face of these serious democratic setbacks, the US government was forced to recognize its own deficiencies to command any credibility.

This humility was also communicated to American embassies prior to the summit. According to the Politico report, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken sent a cable to US embassies all over the world, instructing them that they should acknowledge America’s own challenges and failures on democracy when they speak about the failures of other states on human rights and democracy. The cable noted that the US has not been immune to the challenges that authoritarianism and populism pose to democracy due to “political polarization, disinformation and misinformation, and low levels of trust in government.”²⁴ “We ask no more of other countries than we ask of ourselves,” is the message that Blinken asked American diplomats to convey to their counterparts in their respective countries: “We acknowledge our imperfections. We don’t sweep them under the rug. We confront them openly and publicly.”²⁵

In his opening speech at the summit, Biden acknowledged that the United States is one of the countries which “experienced a decline in at least one aspect of their countries over the last 10 years,” and talked about the US democratic experience as “an ongoing struggle to live up to our highest ideals and to heal our divisions.”²⁶ The subtext of Biden’s speech made numerous implicit references to the US democratic retreat, such as “recommitting” to the nation’s founding idea, “renewing” democracy as “an urgent matter” for all countries to show that democracy needs constant effort of “acknowledging imperfections of democracy and confronting them openly and transparently” as a “unique strength” of democracy. Similarly, Vice-President Harris’s speech explicitly referred to this retreat in American democracy: “Here in the United States, we know that our democracy is not immune from threats. January 6th looms large in our collective conscience. And the

anti-voter laws that many states have passed are part of an international effort to exclude Americans from participating in our democracy.”²⁷

This also attests to the fact that throughout the summit, the Biden administration sought to carry out domestic politics in foreign policy, and vice-versa. Put differently, by seeking to revive democracy promotion in American foreign policy, the Biden administration is also seeking to corner Trumpism in the American domestic political landscape. The new administration sees Trump’s fundamental damage to the US in his undermining of democratic norms and institutions, his weakening of international alliances with ‘democratic’ countries, as well as his emboldening of autocratic and even dictatorial rulers. Hence, the Biden administration is devising a strategy to reclaim domestic politics and to repair weakened international alliances and American leadership under the rubric of reinvigorating democracy at home and abroad.

The Summit for Democracy was meant to be the primary ideological and ‘soft-power’ instrument in the administration’s diplomatic toolbox to curb the increasing global influence of China and Russia. The United States seeks to rally countries around its leadership by appealing to the authority of the concept of democracy. “China is playing the long game by extending its global reach, promoting its own political model,” writes Biden in his Foreign Affairs article.²⁸ Democracy for him is one instrument of “getting tough with China” by “building a united front of U.S. allies and partners to confront China’s abusive behaviors and human rights violations.”²⁹ Back in 2009, Joe Biden, then the vice-president of the Obama administration, told the audience at the Munich Security Conference that Western states should use democracy and development as “two of the most powerful weapons in [their] collective arsenals.”³⁰

At this point the American administration’s Summit for Democracy faces a stark paradox. On the one hand, it tried to depict the summit as a democracy promotion activity not targeting any particular country, namely China and Russia, while on the other hand, it is unequivocally an American attempt to regain supremacy (“being back at the head of the table”) by alienating both countries. While the Biden administration seeks to counterbalance the global pull of China and Russia and “reclaim global leadership” under the banner of protecting and promoting democracy worldwide, this puts countries trying to work with both the US and China and Russia at a crossroads.

The Politics of Invitation: Ins and Outs

In a high-level summit overloaded with symbolic meaning such as this one, the politics of who is in and who is out becomes a central part of the entire endeavor—and the biggest “headache” for the organizers.³¹ The summit was not open to all, with participation based

on invitation by the US. However, the administration did not spell out how it defines democracy, neither did it specify the criteria it used in extending invitations to countries. The US officials stated that they adopted “a really inclusive, big tent approach” for the summit as they aimed to “galvanize democratic renewal worldwide.”³² The US invited 110 countries to the summit in addition to Taiwan, the President of the European Union and the United Nations Secretary-General. This made the question of who to invite and who to ignore a critical decision for the organizers and the summit.

Of the 110 invitees, 77 were considered as ‘free’ or fully democratic according to Freedom House’s 2021 Report, 31 as ‘partly free,’ and 3 fell into the category of ‘not free.’³³ Steven Feldstein points out that eight of the invitees (Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Kenya, Malaysia, Pakistan, Serbia, and Zambia) fare extremely low in the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem) index, which renders their participation questionable. Four countries (Brazil, India, the Philippines, and Poland) have additionally gone through serious setbacks in their democratic quality in 2020, a list which Tunisia joined in 2021.³⁴ Five of the 110 participants do not count as a democracy according to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance’s (IDEA) Global State of Democracy Indices (Angola, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Niger, Serbia and Zambia), and 14 countries who counted as a democracy according to this index were not invited to the summit (Hungary, El Salvador, Sri Lanka, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burkina Faso, Gambia, Guatemala, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Lebanon, Bolivia, Lesotho, Sierra-Leone, Tunisia).³⁵

Replying to criticisms of inconsistency in invitations, the White House Press Secretary said that the invitations should not be taken as “a stamp of approval on their approach to democracy” and suggested that the summit is not an occasion to simply celebrate countries’ achievements in democracy but “an opportunity to continue to strive to do better.”³⁶ On the other hand, those who were excluded from the summit took issue with the American position as arbiter of who counts as a democracy, as was the case in Russia’s foreign ministry spokeswoman who characterized it “cynical” and “pathetic” that the US “claims the right to decide who is worthy of being called a democracy and who is not.”³⁷

The Middle East and North Africa was the least represented region of the world in the summit with only two countries invited: Iraq and Israel. Originally the idea was to invite Israel and Tunisia, but due to Tunisia’s “slow-motion coup” it could no longer qualify for the summit. Yet, the administration thought that including only Israel would be “a non-starter,” hence it half-heartedly added Iraq to the invite list.³⁸ No countries were invited from Central Asia, and four countries were invited from South Asia: India, Pakistan, Nepal,

and the Maldives. Notably, Bangladesh was not extended an invitation, which, although deteriorating in fundamental rights over the last years, is relatively on par with India and Pakistan, who were invited.³⁹

Most critical are perhaps those states who were US allies but were not included in the summit for their democratic regression and diplomatic fallout with the US, namely Turkey and Hungary. Biden has been a vocal critic of the Erdoğan government since his presidential campaign, even calling for emboldening the opposition to defeat Erdoğan in elections.⁴⁰ Hungary was the only EU-member country not invited to the summit by the US. In return, Viktor Orban's government blocked the EU's formal participation in the summit, citing its own exclusion.⁴¹ Hungarian Minister leading Prime Minister Orban's office, Gergely Gulyas, said "Hungary does not have the same serious democratic problems as the United States," adding that they would be "available" in case the US needs their advice.⁴² Orban's government locked horns with the EU as the latter has levelled criticisms over the democratic backsliding in Hungary and regression in political and civil rights, such as media freedom and judicial independence. After having a very cozy relationship with the Trump administration, the Orban government's relationship with the US took a sharp turn with the incoming Biden administration. In a televised town-hall meeting during the election campaign, Biden himself likened the Orban government to "totalitarian regimes," which prompted furious reactions from the Hungarian administration. Criticizing Trump's foreign policy for cozying up to autocratic leaders around the world, Biden said "our current president supports all the thugs in the world."⁴³ In return, during the American elections Orban referred to his "exceptionally good relationship" with Trump and said: "the Hungarian government roots for Donald Trump's victory, because we are well acquainted with American Democratic governments' foreign policy built on moral imperialism. We have sampled it before, even if involuntarily. We did not like it, we do not want seconds."⁴⁴ Hungary is one of the most visible and striking examples of democratic regress, and the Biden administration did not invite it to the summit. Yet, Poland, which is also highly criticized for similar reasons, did secure its place in the summit. In that televised speech, Biden named Belarus, Hungary and Poland as examples of autocratic regimes, despite Poland being invited to the summit, while Belarus and Hungary were not.

Some states chose not to participate in the summit despite being invited. Malaysia decided against partaking in the event for fear of severing ties with China. Walking on the tightrope of a balancing act between China and the US, Malaysian officials largely considered the summit as an 'anti-China meeting.'⁴⁵ For the Malaysian government, the fact that Taiwan was invited while China was not was sufficient evidence for the anti-Chinese character of

the meeting and enough reason to enrage the Chinese side. Despite Malaysia's absence, Indonesia and Philippines, the two other Southeast Asian nations invited, participated in the summit.

Like Malaysia, Pakistan's government also declined to attend the summit, stating that Pakistan was hoping to "engage on this subject at an opportune time in the future."⁴⁶ Observers read this as partially a reaction to the Biden administration's unwillingness to get in high-level communications with the Imran Khan government especially after the Taliban's take-over of Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, but more importantly, in order to not attract China's wrath. Pakistan's relationship with China is critical due to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which envisions 62 billion USD worth of Chinese investments in the country under the Belt and Road Initiative.⁴⁷ A source in Pakistan's foreign ministry told The Guardian that Pakistan would not attend the summit since China was not invited.⁴⁸ Imran Khan suggested that Pakistan did not want to be part of any bloc, but rather serve as a bridge between the US and China. In return, the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson praised Pakistan's non-attendance in the summit as an expression of "real iron brotherhood."⁴⁹

Additionally, South Africa, Mongolia, East Timor, five Pacific Islands, and Seychelles also did not attend the summit. Many analysts suggest the same reason, that is the fear of offending China, as the main motivation in these countries' decision to not participate in the summit.⁵⁰

The participation of Taiwan in the summit especially provoked international controversy. Even though the United States does not recognize Taiwan as an independent state, it was still extended an invitation as a major US ally and a democratic country in the region facing harsh Chinese pressure over the last years. Yet, in order to not escalate tension with China, Taiwan was represented in the summit by its Digital Minister Audrey Tang, rather than President Tsai Ing-wen.⁵¹ China's Spokeswoman for Taiwan Affairs Office, Zhu Fenglian, characterized Taiwan's inclusion in the summit as a "mistake" and called on the US to abide by the 'one China' principle—whereby the US acknowledges China's claim without stating whether it recognizes it.⁵² Interestingly, Taiwanese minister Tang's speech during the summit was cut by State Department officials for about a minute while he was showing a slide with a map that depicted Taiwan with a different color than China, suggesting different statehood, for fear that this would create further complications with the Chinese administration. Although the State Department referred to it as "an honest mistake" due to a "confusion" over screen-sharing, various unidentified officials involved in the matter told Reuters that the cutting of the speech was done deliberately.⁵³

Kosovo was another participant in the summit whose sovereignty is partially recognized across the world due to its territorial dispute with Serbia. According to the US guest list leaked to the Politico website during the planning period, neither Serbia nor Kosovo were invited. However, Kosovo initiated a lobbying campaign for inclusion in the summit that was successful upon the condition that its longtime adversary, Serbia, would also be included.⁵⁴ Hence, both Serbia and Kosovo ended up participating in the event.

Besides these countries with contested statehood, there were also other invited states whose inclusion in the summit generated criticism due to their deteriorating democratic norms and institutions. Countries such as the Philippines, India, Mexico, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Poland were on the guest list, but democratic institutions and political rights and liberties have been in significant decline in these states over the last years according to international indices. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, an invitee to the summit, ranked 137th out of 139 states worldwide in terms of rule of law performance and hence was the poorest performer in that regard on the African continent.⁵⁵ Similarly, Nigeria and South Africa suffered significant setbacks in terms of rights and rule of law but were invited. Rwanda, on the other hand, was not invited despite having the most robust rule of law score in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵⁶

Similarly, the Philippines has been subject to harsh international criticism for its increasing authoritarianism, but President Duterte was still invited in order to not push the Philippines further toward China's orbit. India has also attracted substantial attention for its swift drift toward repressive policies, especially with respect to the Muslim minority living in the country. However, its important strategic role in American policy toward China made it into the guest list. India's participation almost necessitated extending an invitation to Pakistan in order to not lose it to China completely.⁵⁷

In Latin America, Mexico and Brazil were invited despite democratic recession in both countries over the last decade. Uruguay, Chile, and Costa Rica, as top democratic performers in South America, were invited. El-Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, however, could not make the cut.

The invite list makes it quite clear that geopolitical concerns played a major role in the inclusion of some countries. So much so that James Traub, a sympathetic observer of the summit, pointed out that "compromises during the planning process, most of which reflect the traditional calculations of statecraft, have certainly diminished the likelihood of success."⁵⁸

Democracy and Human Rights at the Center?

One of the core questions about the idea of gathering democracies together to counter autocratic regimes is whether excluding adversarial governments from the summit is an appropriate or effective way to ‘reverse’ democratic backsliding and whether it helps or harms efforts to secure cooperation for significant policy issues. While affirming the idea of an informal ‘community of democracies’ serving as a kind of trade association and coordination mechanism “without undermining multilateral institutions,” Michael W. Doyle argues that “Few if any of the world’s major challenges can be met by dividing democratic sheep from non-democratic goats.”⁵⁹

During the summit, the new US administration reiterated its pledge to place democracy and human rights at the heart of its foreign policy.⁶⁰ This pompous statement commands more power in rhetoric than it does in reality, but the Biden administration did adopt a decidedly more moralistic tone in foreign policy in contradistinction to its predecessor’s more transactional approach. While Trump’s foreign policy was criticized for failing to live up to ‘American values’—a euphemism for democracy and human rights—the Biden administration, and indeed any administration that claims to speak from a higher moral ground, faces the criticism of hypocrisy. One of the key supporters of and contributors to the summit, Thomas Carothers, a leading figure in the theory and practice of democracy promotion, acknowledges that geopolitics often trumps concerns for democracy to the point that it ends up creating a “cynicism” that undermines such democracy promotion activities.⁶¹ He and Frances Z. Brown point out that the US should acknowledge that it has “a long history of loudly advocating for democracy in principle yet compromising on democracy in practice.”⁶²

One observer of the summit, Colin Dueck, took issue with Biden’s statement that democracy constitutes the center of American foreign policy. Dueck points out that while Biden has been harshly critical of Trump administration’s indifference to international human rights issues especially with respect to Saudi Arabia and Egypt, his own administration is continuing to work with them. For him, this “moralistic pomposity” that is unmatched in practical action demonstrates the “hollowness” of Biden’s position on democracy and human rights during the election campaign. Besides, Dueck finds the idea of rallying all liberal democratic states all over the world against illiberal authoritarian states to be “non-sensical.” The real threat the United States faces is not from illiberal states per se, but from China, and the US does not have the luxury to refuse to cooperate with undemocratic or illiberal regimes.

For Dueck, it is simply “bizarre” for the United States to limit its cooperation and alliances against China to only democratic states. For example, while Vietnam is a one-party dictatorship, the United States will still have to work with it, and indeed still does, to balance Chinese influence in the region. Hence, “reality imposes itself on the administration’s pious declarations,” which for him begs the question: “Why issue such empty declamations when there is no need to so? They only undermine U.S. credibility.”⁶³ For Dueck, the only real reason for the Biden administration to host what he calls “the summit of babble” is to “bolster the apparently insatiable liberal Western need for mental and verbal self-affirmation.”⁶⁴ Domestic and foreign policy concerns were so intermeshed in the summit that it raised criticisms from the other side of the political isle in the US. Speaking at an event at the Heritage Foundation, Dueck characterizes the summit as just another venue for liberals to push their domestic liberal agenda against conservatives.⁶⁵

In contradistinction to these harsh criticisms, other critics provide a more charitable interpretation of the summit while criticizing its underlying logic. Stephen Walt questions the geopolitical rationality of estranging the US illiberal or undemocratic potential allies in its rivalry with China based on considerations of regime type. Walt argues that even though “there is nothing wrong” in bringing together world democracies to strengthen democracy which is under assault in many parts of the world, the problem is one of consistency and priorities.⁶⁶ If democracy and human rights are to be the core of US foreign policy, to be consistent, it should then “stop supporting authoritarian rulers in Egypt and Saudi Arabia” and distance itself from states “veering in autocratic directions (like Turkey and Hungary) or systematically denying political rights to millions of people (like Israel and China).”⁶⁷ Of these countries Walt mentions, only Israel was invited to the summit, where its prime minister boasted about “being the only democracy in the Middle East.”⁶⁸ But if the priority is balancing a rising China, then “Washington can’t be so choosy about who its friends are” since choosing allies on the basis of their regime type would reduce the number and potential of US allies, thereby giving more space of influence to China. The dictates of geopolitics depart radically from one’s preferred or ideal regime type. Although Stalin was a “mass murderer,” Stalinist Russia was still “the most valuable ally the United States ever had, given the central role it played in defeating Nazi Germany.”⁶⁹ In that sense, drawing on democracy in foreign policy would not make much strategic sense, according to Walt, if the primary challenge is a more assertive China. Dividing states into good and bad ones based on their domestic regime type would “consciously exclude a lot of big and important countries,” and hence be quite “counterproductive” in fostering cooperation on important policy issues.

The Aftermath of the Summit

Thomas Carothers suggests that the summit served at least two purposes, while the long-term impact, if any, is far from clear. First is the symbolic function it served, and second is the stirring up of bureaucratic initiatives for reform. Carothers argues that the summit was a “signaling event” that communicated American commitment to place democracy at the center of US foreign policy to strengthen democracy worldwide. This claim is quite a hard sell. It is an open question as to whether regimes around the world would think that their relationship with the US will be substantially mediated through their democratic performance. This is what the letter of the speeches and documents suggest, but it is debatable whether regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates would consider democratization in order to not lose American support or whether political leaders in Israel, India, Hungary, and Turkey would stop democratic retreat in order to have better relations with the US.

The second achievement of the summit, according to Carothers, is the gathering of a series of initiatives that focused on tangible reforms on democracy and human rights, such as anti-corruption measures and assistance programs for independent media, free elections, and technology to protect democracy. What is striking here is the unmistakable absence of security-related measures with respect to democratic progress. It shows that the US is not willing to use the sticks it has in its diplomatic arsenal to pressure states to democratize. On a rare occasion, the Biden administration decided to withhold 130 million USD worth of US security assistance to Egypt due to its failure to meet the conditions set with respect to its human rights record. More specifically, the US concern has been on the longtime prosecution of civil society activists in a legal case known as Case 173.⁷⁰ However, this amount is only a fraction of the total 1.3 billion USD annual American military aid to Egypt, and Egypt continues to buy expensive military equipment, airplanes, and ships from the United States—including the sale of C-130 cargo jets and radar worth 2.5 billion USD a month after the Summit for Democracy.⁷¹

The participating governments in the summit were expected to announce new specific policy initiatives to “repair and strengthen” democracy at home and abroad by late January to put into practice the “year of action” before the second meeting of the summit. The official documents reveal that one of the organizers’ biggest fears was that it would form yet another international forum for world leaders to indulge themselves in lofty rhetoric about the virtues of democracy while continuing business as usual. That is why official speeches are filled with emphasis on action and specific policy measures.

However, in order for the summit to deliver tangible results for democratic restoration and consolidation, it needed to have a monitoring mechanism to check whether and/or to what extent governments were living up to their promises. The summit documents did not specify a structure of monitoring to follow up on the progress on countries, rather monitoring was left broadly to civil society and media to track. After the event, The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), a think tank supported by the European Union and one cited by Biden in his opening speech, took upon itself the task to monitor the developments following the summit.

IDEA's first progress report analyzes the substance of country commitments in the summit. Analyzing the 97 brief recorded video interventions delivered by heads of states, IDEA finds that 53% of official statements included either generic commitments to democracy and human rights or no commitments at all, and 65% of statements mentioned already existing reforms rather than future commitments.⁷² However, it should also be kept in mind that the US asked governments to refer to specific initiatives they started on the themes of the summit. Therefore, it is not clear what percentage of these existing reforms were started for the purposes of the summit. After the verbal communication of their countries' commitments, the US invited the participating delegations to share their commitments and pledges in written form. About half of the attending states have gone on to submit their written pledges on the summit website, more specifically, 56 states have done so as of February 28, 2022. This is supposed to serve as a benchmark to evaluate the practical and specific progress of each country on democracy and human rights in the lead up to the summit's second installation in late 2022. However, it is not clear whether countries that do not honor their promises would be disinvited from the second round of the summit in 2022. Observers point out that in the absence of serious consequences, "the summit could easily serve as a legitimating device for less-than-democratic countries."⁷³

Reactions from China and Russia: Contest of Models

For the summit organizers, the global decline of democracy is linked to the decline of the US relative power in world politics. In the same vein, the rise of authoritarianism globally is in some ways a function of the rise of the relative power of China and Russia. Therefore, strengthening democracy and stopping authoritarian drift serves as a euphemism for taming the rising power of China and Russia. Despite US officials' statements that the summit does not target any country, the speeches by the US President Joe Biden and the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken make open references to China and Russia as countries that support global democratic retreat by undermining democratic processes elsewhere and shoring up their autocratic allies. In the face of this American attempt to strengthen alliances against

these two powers by invoking the authority of democracy, China and Russia responded by reverting to the old Cold War strategy of contesting the definition of democracy and highlighting the shortcomings of the American model of democracy, even arguing that they had a superior form of democracy.

In the run-up to the Summit for Democracy, China and Russia took a very rare step. Two weeks before the meeting took place, when the US government shared information about the invitation list, the Russian and Chinese ambassadors to the United States, Anatoly Antonov and Qin Gang, co-authored an article in *The National Interest*, titled “Respecting People’s Democratic Rights.”⁷⁴ This piece communicated to the American public and the world at large the official positions of Russia and China toward the upcoming summit. The ambassadors stated that their respective countries “firmly reject this move” to organize the summit and make several arguments to substantiate their rejection.

First, they argue that by organizing this event, the US is reproducing “the Cold-War mentality” which only works to “stoke up ideological confrontation and a rift in the world, creating new ‘dividing lines.’”⁷⁵ For them the goal is to prevent the shaping of “a global polycentric architecture,” which for them is bound to fail. As was discussed above, the criticism of creating a Cold-War like confrontation is one that is levelled at organizers inside and outside the US. Grant Golub suggests that the US under the Biden administration is operating with a “Cold War-style mental map” despite the declarations to the contrary.⁷⁶ Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in 2021, Biden claimed that the world was “at an inflection point between those who argue that [...] autocracy is the best way forward [...] and those who understand that democracy is essential.”⁷⁷ Representing international political competition as a struggle between democracy and autocracy, Biden calls for “a long-term strategic competition with China” which will prove to be “stiff.”

While pointing out in the same speech that “we cannot and must not return to the reflexive opposition and rigid blocs of the Cold War,”⁷⁸ Biden invokes the same tropes and strategies employed during the Cold War. According to Golub, this revival of a Cold War mindset is “unhelpful” as it “splits nations into rival groups on Manichean terms, usually preventing cooperation across a range of vital issues,” such as climate change, international migration, pandemics, and nuclear proliferation.⁷⁹

Second, Russia and China criticize the summit by questioning the US “empowering” of itself to the position of defining who is and who is not a democratic country. “No country has the right to judge the world’s vast and varied political landscape by a single yardstick,”

they argued.⁸⁰ Hence they challenge the US attempt to situate itself as the arbiter as well as champion of global democracy. As mentioned above, Russia's Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman characterized the United States "claims to right to decide who is worthy of being called a democracy and who is not as "cynical" and "pathetic."⁸¹

Interestingly, China has been particularly more insistent on contesting the American claim to authority on the question of democracy. Just before the Democracy Summit convened, the Chinese foreign ministry went on to publish an official report, titled "The State of Democracy in the United States," which aims to "expose the deficiencies and abuse of democracy in the US as well as the harm of its exporting such democracy."⁸² The 30-page report starts with affirming democracy "as a common value shared by all humanity" and "a right for all nations, not a prerogative reserved to a few." While it represents democracy as "a manifestation of the political advancement of humanity," it also claims that only the people of a country can judge whether their system of government is democratic, not "a minority of self-righteous outsiders." It then goes on to create space for different understandings and applications of democracy. There is no one-size-fits-all model of democracy, the report argues, rather, "democracy is established and developed based on a country's own history and adapted to its national context, and each country's democracy has its unique value." By so doing, China elevates democracy to the status of a universal norm to which they also subscribe but seeks to provide legitimation for their political system by representing it as one form of democracy.

The report then starts an all-out offensive on American democracy. It collects both internal criticisms levelled at US democracy by critical voices in the American public sphere as well as Chinese officials' own evaluation. While the development of American democracy was "a step forward" in world history, American democracy "degenerated" and "deviated from the essence of democracy and its original design." Claiming to be the 'beacon of democracy' at the time of its founding, several problems plagued American democracy and "alienated" and "weakened" it, including "money politics, identity politics, wrangling between political parties, political polarization, social division, racial tension and wealth gap." The report claims that "American-style democracy has become 'a game of money politics,'" restricting the use of democratic rights provided by the US constitution, which makes "a mockery of democracy in the US." It is a regime in which "Wall Street regulates Congress," and "big companies, a small group of rich people, and interest groups" rule the country by controlling the ruling elites through electoral funding—which amounts to "legitimate bribery." It restricts voters' choice, forgets about ordinary people after they cast their votes, effectively treating people as "just 'walk-ons' in the theater of election."

The report further argues that the American system has “too many checks and balances, raising the cost of collective action and in some cases making it impossible altogether.” Borrowing from Francis Fukuyama, the report characterizes the US system as a “vetocracy,” which creates “political paralysis” and becomes “a formula for gridlock.” It claims that partisanship in the US is so extreme that politicians “are preoccupied with securing their own partisan interests and don’t care at all about national development.”

The document seeks to justify and demonstrate the superiority of Chinese style authoritarian government—its own form of illiberal “whole process democracy”—one that does not allow for political dissent and difference. The text mentions the Capitol riot of January 6, 2021 as an evidence of democracy’s failure, referring to “entrenched racism” as an “indelible blot” of American democracy, highlighting the increase in instances of antisemitism, bullying of Asian Americans, and other hate crimes. The report also frames the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic in the US as evidence of the failure of its democracy. It argues that “the US has been a total mess” in its response to Covid since politicians prioritized partisan interests over national interests, politicized pandemic response, engaged in blame games, and refused to rely on science. Even issues such as vaccination and mask-wearing, it argues, have become “a bone of contention between parties.”

The rest of the report is an emphatic rejection of US democracy promotion policies. The report argues that through democracy promotion, the US “imposes its own political system and values on other nations,” “interferes in other countries’ internal affairs and even subverts their governments,” bringing about “disastrous consequences for those countries.” Such efforts are not only “entirely undemocratic and at odds with the core values and tenets of democracy,” but they also end up being “failed transplants” that only create further conflicts and turmoil.

As it stands, the report is a typical exercise in ‘whataboutism’—a rhetorical gesture to reverse the accusation or criticism by accusing the opponent with the same or worse, without disproving the original argument. China and Russia’s strategy here is to discredit America’s democratic credentials to undermine its self-assumed authority to speak for and galvanize democracies all over the world. However, compared to Russia, China has been particularly assertive in promoting its own form of governance as a model for the world. Indeed, Russia only claims to be a federal constitutional democracy, without resorting to adjectives to qualify its democracy as a different brand. Meanwhile, China forcefully attempts to depict its political regime as an alternative political system tout court that is democratic while not being tainted by the problems and dysfunctions of democratic processes in the US

and other European democracies. In that sense, China asserts the superiority of its own political regime, whereas Russia is mostly focused on criticizing the West, especially the United States, for instrumentalizing and weaponizing democracy in its foreign policy. China is no longer on the defensive, arguing that its tight political system is a necessity to achieve prosperity in a large country, rather it is now on the offensive, claiming that its own model of democracy far exceeds liberal democracies in performance and substance.⁸³

In addition to the Chinese Foreign Ministry's "State of Democracy in the US" report, China's State Council Information Office issued another official report on December 4, 2021, titled "China: Democracy that Works."⁸⁴ This report defines the Chinese regime as a "whole-process people's democracy under Communist Party of China Leadership" and as "a model of socialist democracy" that integrates procedures of democracy with its substantive aspects and attains better results and performances. This second report defines the Chinese regime as "a true democracy that works" in the face of Western liberal democracies that fail to deliver. It depicts the Chinese regime as having a "sound institutional framework" and effective mechanisms of consultation, participation, and supervision. As such, the report elevates the Chinese experience to the status of "a new model of democracy," while not seeking to export it. It emphasizes that China did not follow or imitate "the established path of Western countries in its modernization drive," but rather "created its own model," one that is best "in line with its national conditions." Here China once again launches heated criticism of the West's democracy promotion activities as infringing upon their sovereignty and interfering with their internal affairs. The report describes such efforts as "rooted in 'arrogance, prejudice, and hostility towards other countries' attempts to explore their own paths to democracy." It explicitly states that China's priority "always rests with development," while claiming that it "strives to strike a balance between democracy and development."

These texts are China's state effort to counter pressure rather than provide a balanced analysis, as is evident in their rather unusually angry tone. However, despite their propagandistic character, they do reveal rather clearly the way in which they react to the question of democracy in general and to the Democracy Summit in particular. The Chinese regime capitalizes on the criticisms levelled at the flaws of American democracy by American and other observers to make the argument that liberal democracy of the American variety is ineffective, defunct, and not truly a democracy, while not bothering to acknowledge or address the criticisms against the numerous deeply troubling policies inside China.

Reverberations of the Summit in The Middle East

In the entire Middle East region, only Israel and Iraq were invited to the summit, which made the Middle East the least represented region in the event. Israel was invited despite its record of violations of human rights and democratic norms,⁸⁵ which even lead some observers to question the appropriateness of characterizing its regime as a democracy.⁸⁶ The Israeli prime minister used the speech as an occasion to pinpoint Iran as the main enemy of democracy in the region for its support for autocracies.⁸⁷ Iraq's invitation also attracted criticism, since Iraq is categorized as a 'not free' country according to the Freedom House's 2021 Freedom in the World Report.

Turkey constitutes the most interesting and consequential case of non-invitation in the Middle East. Just a decade ago, at the start of the uprisings, Turkey under the AK Party government was widely referred to as a democracy that could serve as a model for Arab and Muslim countries. Now Turkey is widely counted as one of the most conspicuous cases of democratic backsliding. According to IDEA's Global State of the Democracy Index, Turkey is a hybrid regime with effective electoral participation and inclusive suffrage, but one with significant problems in the protection of fundamental civil and political rights, checks on government power, judicial independence, and impartiality of administration.⁸⁸ Similarly, the Freedom House's annual Freedom in the World Report puts Turkey in the category of 'not free', giving it a 32 out of 100 points in terms of its political rights and civil liberties record.⁸⁹ Turkey is the only NATO member country in the Middle East and is negotiating for full membership in the European Union. Turkey has also been a close US ally during the Cold War and onwards. The last decade, however, has seen a diplomatic fall out between the US and Turkey on many crucial foreign policy issues, including Turkey's purchase of S-400 air defense systems from Russia and its ensuing removal from the F-35 multirole fighter jet program, US support for the YPG in Syria, as well as numerous heated diplomatic exchanges over political prisoners in Turkey. This makes Turkey's exclusion from the summit quite noticeable, perhaps seconded only by Hungary's exclusion as the only EU-member state not invited to the summit.

TRT World, Turkey's state-owned English television channel, reported on the summit by criticizing the inconsistencies in its invite list and by pointing out the discrepancies in the US claims to champion democracy and its poor democratic performance. Carefully not mentioning the fact that Turkey was not invited, the report questioned the guest list as "having more to do with U.S. politics and interests rather than about the state of democratic values around the world" and questioned the US moral authority to host such an event when there are more than 60 countries in the world whose democracy score is higher than the US according to the latest Freedom House report.⁹⁰

On the other hand, Iran and Syria, two authoritarian countries that are close allies of Russia and China, took more active measures to speak publicly against the summit and to display solidarity with Russia and China. Speaking at the “International Forum on Democracy: The Shared Human Values” conference organized by the Chinese government a week before the Summit for Democracy, the Syrian ambassador to China stated that the United States is in no position to arbitrate what democracy is and whether a certain political system is democratic or not.⁹¹ Repeating the same line as China’s reports on democracy, he argued that “there is no single path or unique recipe for democracy,” as people may choose, depending on their “various levels of stages of human social development, political context and economic conditions,” different governance mechanisms that are “far better than offered by Western style democracies.”⁹²

Iranian officials and media also provided harsh criticisms of the summit. Calling it “a PR stunt,” Tehran Times highlighted the irony that the summit was organized just after the US won a court ruling appeal to extradite Julian Assange, “a journalist who exposed U.S. war crimes.”⁹³ It refers to investigative reports on CIA plans to “kidnap and assassinate” Assange, the “coup attempt” at Capitol Hill after the election of Joe Biden, the opinion polls that show “half the population still think the election was rigged,” wealth and inequalities as evidence that the United States has no credentials to host such an event.⁹⁴ Similarly, several Iranian parliamentarians attacked the summit as a “means of covering up heinous crimes of the United States”⁹⁵ and an attempt to “deceive the world” while the United States has “the worst human rights record.”⁹⁶

Not surprisingly, voices emanating from the Middle East media were mostly quite critical of the Democracy Summit. Echoing the United Arab Emirates leadership’s sentiments, the Emarat al-Youm newspaper suggested that the summit would turn into “mere gossip.”⁹⁷ It criticized the US for the criteria it used for invitations as well as the quality of its own democracy over the last years, questioning the logic behind the participation of countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan, and Zambia, as well as Brazil, India, and Philippines, who have all “morphed into models that symbolize the regression of democracy.”⁹⁸ Emarat al-Youm also published articles arguing that the summit for democracy will not make the US safer as it prioritized ideology at the expense of interests⁹⁹ and affirmatively quoted analysts that claimed that the summit “betrays American national interests.”¹⁰⁰ This is emblematic of the overall distaste within the Arab Gulf countries for the ideologically-heavy rhetoric of democratic presidencies vis-à-vis the more transactional modus operandi of republican administrations.

Democracy activists in the Arab world also took the summit with some grain of salt. Speaking at a conference in Washington D.C. titled 'Democracy First in the Arab World', Moncef Marzouki, the former interim president of Tunisia, said: "We value President Joe Biden's effort to defend democracy in the world, and we wish the summit every success." He followed this up, however, by saying: "All that we call upon Western countries in general and the United States in particular, is to stop supporting authoritarian regimes or prevent our peoples from exercising their minimum right to democracy." By supporting regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, Marzouki argued, the US is "promoting the spread of the model of governance that blends liberalism and dictatorship."¹⁰¹ Echoing the same point, Abdullah Alaoudh, the Gulf director at Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN), called upon the Biden administration to "strengthen its relations with civil society groups rather than supporting tyrannical governments."¹⁰² Indeed, Arab civil society and democracy activists were also very underrepresented. Despite a broad range of civil society invitations from across the world, the only civil society activist invited from the Middle East was Mohamed Zaree, the director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies—the other invitee from the region was the Jordanian Prince and former diplomat Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein.

The lack of engagement with the Middle East during the summit is quite unmistakable. Charles W. Dunne of the Arab Center Washington D.C. suggests that "by failing to engage on an area of the world that Freedom House ranks as the least free on earth, the summit failed to stand up for democracy where it is most needed."¹⁰³ For Dunne, it is understandable that repressive regimes such as Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and United Arab Emirates, all key US allies in the region, were not invited to the organization, but he finds it noteworthy that these countries were hardly ever mentioned by participants including the US. In addition, the summit did not mention any of the massive human rights violations, political imprisonments, maltreatment and torture in jails, forced disappearances, intimidation and incarceration of political opponents and abuse of anti-terror laws, indicating the Biden administration's intention to accommodate friendly autocracies in the Middle East.

The only occasion at the summit that US foreign policy toward the Middle East was subjected to criticism was the speech delivered by Mohamed Zaree, the director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies in Egypt. Zaree argued that one of the core reasons for the failure of the democratic transitions of the Arab uprisings was "the international community's preoccupation with restoring order over supporting democracy."¹⁰⁴ This was in part caused by what he called the "acute acceleration of foreign policy securitization in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks and the global war on terror," which produced "a false dichotomy of stability

versus democracy which still guides the international community's approach towards the region till today." Zaree suggested that the international community "has unequivocally supported authoritarianism" in the region in the name of counterterrorism, controlling illegal migration, or other military and security cooperation. It provided "direct political backing through recognition, praise, and whitewashing authoritarian policies and human rights crimes; direct and indirect financial assistance, including through international financial institutions; and through the selling of arms or military/police equipment and cyber espionage technology—often used against peaceful dissidents, democracy advocates, and human rights defenders in countries like Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and UAE." Thus, a complete overhaul of foreign policy approach toward the region is in order if the summit genuinely intends to move "beyond treating democracy as a rhetorical tool." That would require, first and foremost, a "de-securitization" of foreign policies that downsizes military assistance and ratchets up assistance to human rights advocacy and development.¹⁰⁵ This shows, once again, that the Middle East will prove to be the most critical case to adjudicate the sincerity of American democracy promotion.

Conclusion

The Summit for Democracy is the Biden administration's attempt to rescue the declining liberal international order and redeem American primacy in it by bolstering its weakened alliances against a rising China and Russia and by drawing on the normative authority of democracy in world politics. It is also a product of American domestic political concerns to counter the political tide of Trumpism inside the United States and hence to 'hold the center' of that waning international order. In a sense, it is a continuation of domestic politics in foreign policy that aimed to beat Trump administration's amorphous populist ideology which undermined democratic institutions in the US and eroded its alliances abroad.

It is clear, however, that democracy itself was not the driving force of the summit, nor was its goal to form a democratic front against rising autocracy all over the world. Rather, democracy was used as a rhetorical cement to glue together the alliances that are deemed strategically valuable for the US. Although short on tangible results, as perhaps any summit on such a complex issue, the summit was not simply hot air either. Rather, it was an international political gesture. It took a posture and made a political statement about certain commitments. The United States is seeking exclusive ownership and championship of the sign of democracy whose international currency has declined lately because of the increasing dysfunction of Western democracies and increasing assertiveness of Chinese and Russian models of governance. This is why China and Russia, the two powers who were excluded from the summit and were its harshest critics, sought to rhetorically disarm

the United States by claiming that they too are democracies, indeed better functioning democracies, while attacking liberal democracy itself, especially its American instantiation. This is reminiscent of the Cold War-style contestations of models and ideological battles over the adjectives of democracy.

This most recent democracy promotion initiative in American foreign policy also drew attention to the broader question of how norms, interests, and power interrelate in international politics. When state actors attempt to promote norms in international politics, they often instrumentalize them to bolster their relative power positions and further their interests, which compromises and even cripples the moral force of norms. This instrumentalization is evident in the Biden administration's declaration that democracy and human rights would be at the center of its foreign policy to counter China and Russia's growing power and influence. The Summit for Democracy is the latest example of how the US instrumentalizes democracy as a norm through which it can build alliances, strengthen existing ones, or seek to discipline those allies who seem to go astray in their foreign and domestic policy orientations. In return, China and Russia also instrumentalized democracy by claiming that they are 'true' democracies while the US is not really a working democracy. The point here is not to equate the value of both instrumentalizations. As much as the American attempts can be subjected to criticisms of hypocrisy, the Russian and Chinese efforts can well be seen as cynical exercises in counter-propaganda. Still, the fact that the Chinese and Russian regimes feel the need to prop up their democratic credentials despite their blatantly autocratic models of governance speaks to the aspirational power of the norm of democracy in world politics. Democracy is instrumentalized by all these major powers in different ways. The US seeks to use it as a weapon in its arsenal, as Biden put it in his 2009 address to the Munich Security Forum, and China and Russia try to deny it to the United States by seeking to rhetorically appropriate the norm more aggressively.

One of the key questions the summit raises is whether the US has the will and capacity to commit itself to democratic reform elsewhere. Many skeptics argue that it has neither of the two, some sympathetic critics argue that even if the Biden administration does have the will, it does not have the power to make other countries more democratic "since so much of the problem of democratic erosion lies inside states and can only be addressed inside states."¹⁰⁶ Still some others argue that despite the rhetoric, there is no sign that the US is likely to change its policy of supporting friendly autocratic regimes especially in the Middle East. As one observer put it, "ruthless pragmatism" is the defining framework of the Biden administration's strategy toward the Middle East,¹⁰⁷ which frustrates human rights and democracy activists such as Mohamed Zaree, who articulated his criticisms at the summit. Although some countries used

the summit as an occasion to buttress their commitments, it is questionable as to whether countries where democratic institutions are in retreat or never took place are likely to reverse their course. While the summit did exclude US allies such as Turkey and Hungary, it also gave a greenlight to other countries with a regressing democracy or a questionable democratic record. Outside the summit, the non-invited autocracies are unlikely to face any significant hurdle to continuing their business as usual and continuing transactional interactions and strategic cooperation with the United States.

Whether this new-found American enthusiasm for protecting and promoting democracy abroad will have any effect to reverse global democratic backsliding is a question only the future can tell. But if history provides any insight in this regard, it is perhaps one of skepticism and guarded caution. James Traub reports that months before the summit some figures in the Biden administration intended to release a strategy document that would lay out the role democracy would play in Biden's foreign policy. But shortly after, he writes, the idea was discarded by Jack Sullivan, the National Security Advisor, and his deputy Jon Finer, as they were, in the words of a senior official, "not so excited about putting stuff down on paper for fear that it would reveal tensions in democracy policy."¹⁰⁸ It is precisely these tensions, either written on paper or performed within and outside the summit, that complicate the chances of success of any such endeavor.

Endnotes

- 1- Steven W. Hook, "Inconsistent U.S. Efforts to Promote Democracy Abroad", in *Exporting Democracy: Rhetoric vs. Reality*, ed. by Peter J. Schraeder, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), p.111
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A think tank that looks to undertake impartial, rigorous research to promote the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue and social justice.

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