



DEMOCRACY

Strengthening Liberal Democracies

“Democracy is back in international relations, especially in the transatlantic relationship.”

Threats to Democracy

The need to resist pressures undermining our democracies has been a focus of recent foreign policy discourse and of the Summits held by the G7, EU-US, NATO and between Biden and Putin in June 2021. American, British, European and Australian participants in *Keeping Channels Open* dialogues, held under the Chatham House Rule, spoke passionately on the issue:

“The terrible threat to democracy present on both sides of the Atlantic in the form of populist movements is one of the things that is bringing us closer together.”

“The crisis of liberal democracy is a huge issue worldwide - in the US, it’s a question of voting rights, in Europe, it’s about Hungary and Poland. Other countries are also backsliding amid divisive culture wars. So democracy deserves to be very much among the major priorities of the Biden administration, Europe and elsewhere.”

“Democracy had disappeared from the scene for nearly a decade, dating back to the global financial crisis. The days of democracy promotion gave way to an age of multipolarity as the world toughened up, especially given how the Iraq intervention turned out, and the Arab and Colour revolutions. Democracy had even started to exit the scene within the transatlantic relationship with Trump and the rise of nationalist populism in Europe - France, Germany, Italy, UK, Poland, Hungary, etc.”

Is Democracy Back?

Democracy had ‘infused’ recent international strategies towards a range of countries including Russia, Belarus and Myanmar. Agreement on a global minimum tax rate was also characterised as a response to rising inequality, perceived failings of democracy and perceptions that elites were exploiting the system.

“One of the most corrosive things to democracies has been a sense that things have gotten way too unequal and some people are cheating the system. All the talk about a foreign policy for the middle class is connected to people’s concerns about democracy.”

“Biden has put democracy at the heart of his foreign and domestic policies. With our deep dysfunction and the radicalization of one of our major parties around the big lie that Trump won this election, with that challenge at home and that of China abroad, democracies have got to get our act together and prove that we can deliver real results for people.”

“We must make liberal democracy more attractive as a model by putting forward alternatives to the things people find genuinely attractive about what China or Russia can offer.”

The G7 “Open Societies” statement from June 2021 set the scene for the US Democracy Summit, and underlined the importance of democracies coming together in a “frank acknowledgment” of democratic deficits at home as well as vulnerabilities to external interference.

Complacency was not an option, as several experts agreed. **“We need to stand up for our values where they're challenged... because our democratic worldview is something we need to bolster and nurture, not something that will just deliver because we believe in our values.”**

“The June Summits took a very fractured liberal democratic world and fashioned a very solid agreement on the broad direction that liberal democracies should take, beginning a process in which they take their responsibilities to uphold the rules-based international system more seriously.”

Areas of action included revitalising democracy, representation and respect for rights and equality within Western countries and the wider democratic world. Culture wars, polarization and deliberate



divisiveness had also infected our politics and was muddying public discourse on democracy, good governance, individual liberty and responsible behaviour. Far-reaching technological changes to our information environment and challenges to norms of politics and governance also meant a new discussion was needed on what constitutes a real democracy in the 21st century.

Broader Outreach

One KCO participant noted that for the democracy narrative to work and resilience to grow, the Western Alliance must reach out to other democracies in the G20 and beyond and bring them onside - though there would be challenges given the dubious state of democracy in some partner states. "We may not be able to bring about democracy in China, but there is a lot we can do to underpin and support democracy in countries like India and Indonesia, which will be important to containing China."



Liberal Democracy vs Authoritarianism

At the same time, another participant said it was a "big mistake to frame the relationship with China as some sort of contest between liberal democracy and authoritarianism as we could end up with total hypocrisy. The lack of genuine democracy in some partners like Turkey or India would test the credibility of any coalition. It would be smarter to decouple the need to contain China from the formation of the biggest possible alliance of democracies."

Afghanistan

Recent events in Afghanistan have again tested the concept that the West is able to 'export' democracy to other countries with very different cultures and traditions, even where citizens want the associated benefits and freedoms. An analysis of failures and successes in the 20-year international intervention will no doubt continue into the future. But one thing is already clear - the appetite for ambitious nation-building missions is gone.