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Democracies Must Work in Concert

The first big foreign policy debate of the presidential campaign has focused on Senator John McCain's proposal for a League of Democracies. Proponents of this new grouping see it as a mechanism to legitimise the American use of force when the United Nations fails to authorise collective action, and as a vehicle to strengthen the forces of democracy in the face of rising authoritarian states, such as China and Russia. Critics see it as a dangerous idea – potentially subverting the UN and creating divisions among the great powers precisely when the US should be building closer ties.

As authors of the Princeton Project on National Security report that first proposed a “Concert of Democracies”, we believe that both sides of this debate have failed to see the true promise and role of greater co-operation among the world's leading democracies. The pre-eminent need today is not an exclusive club of democracies, but renewal of the world's global architecture – the UN, Bretton Woods and the Group of Eight leading nations. It is in the context of this larger agenda that a Concert of Democracies can be helpful.

Over the past half-century, two logics of global organisation have co-existed. One was the great power order symbolically centred in the UN Security Council and the other was the western democratic order that was centred in Washington but also present in London, Paris, Bonn, Tokyo, Brussels and elsewhere. It was the unusual capacities of liberal democracies to organise, produce and work together that ensured victory in the struggle of the 20th century between democracy and communism. In proposing a Concert of Democracies, we are urging the world's democracies once again to work together – this time to renew and expand world governance capacities.

Although conventional wisdom sees the post-second-world-war democratic order primarily as a bulwark against communism, institutions such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (which evolved into the World Trade Organisation), the European Union and Nato in its later years succeeded best when they acted as vehicles to allow a group of countries to co-operate in the pursuit of common interests.

Those common interests today are quite different. They begin with widening the circles of global decision-making. A Concert of Democracies could bring India, South Africa, Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Turkey and many others to the table well before they are likely to succeed in getting there in current institutions.

One of the arguments advanced against Senator McCain's League is that it presumes a higher degree of harmony among the world's democracies than is supported by the evidence. But the

one thing these countries agree on is that they should have more of a say in global affairs. By making clear that liberal democracy is not confined to “the west”, a Concert would redraw the geopolitical map and open spaces to reform global institutions to reflect the world they purportedly represent.

One place to start is to call a new Bretton Woods conference to retrofit the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to meet the economic challenges of the 21st century rather than those of the 1930s. There is an urgent need to make globalisation work for everyone. Globalisation makes nations richer in the aggregate and has helped hundreds of millions to rise out of poverty, but it is also widening inequality in ways that breed anger, resentment and despair. A Concert of Democracies reaching from Brasilia to Ankara to Seoul could lobby within the UN for such a conference and ensure that once convened it achieved its purpose.

Another immediate task for a Concert of Democracies would be to achieve the long-awaited expansion of the G8 to a G13 or a G16. Expansion to a G13 would add China, India, Brazil, South Africa and Mexico; expansion to a G16 would include Indonesia, Turkey and either Nigeria or Egypt. Almost all these countries are democracies, but a Concert of Democracies that included southern as well as northern democracies would insist on including China in any expansion of the G8. That fact highlights the contrast between our Concert and Senator McCain’s proposal of a League of Democracies, together with the expulsion of Russia from the G8. Democracies understand the need to have effective global institutions that include all important powers.

Some critics fear that a Concert of Democracies would amplify American power and the resistance to it around the world. In fact, it would be a more effective multilateral council to check rash, unilateral US initiatives. If the US had proposed invading Iraq within a Concert of Democracies, the opposition of friendly democracies around the world would have reinforced the opposition of the Security Council in ways that would have had greater resonance in American public opinion.

The next American president should not begin his term by pushing for a Concert of Democracies. He should, however, consult with democracies around the world to explore support for the idea in the context of pushing for reform of existing global institutions. If such support exists, and we suggest it does, America should be willing to join with other democracies in making those institutions reflect the global distribution of power among all countries in the 21st century.

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