

The Case for a Concert of Democracies

James M. Lindsay

Globalization has remade the world we once knew. We now live in an era in which dangerous developments anywhere can have devastating consequences everywhere. Terrorism is an obvious example: a few young men born in Riyadh and trained in the Hindu Kush can turn jetliners into weapons of mass destruction in New York and Washington. Infectious disease is another: a person with a particularly virulent form of flu could board a plane in Hong Kong and inadvertently spread sickness to every corner of the globe. Or international finance: the collapse of the housing market in Northern California can trigger a major financial panic and push us to the brink of a global depression.

A world in which problems cross borders so easily is one in which broad-based multilateral cooperation is essential. Today, however, we lack international institutions that are capable of prompt and effective action. Over a whole range of challenges, the world is essentially undergoverned. The institutions we do have were created in a different time for different purposes. They all too often reflect the geopolitical realities of a world that no longer exists, and are incapable of meeting the challenges we now face.

New institutions are now needed that recognize how much the world has changed and that mobilize those states most capable of meeting the dangers we confront. One such institution would bring together the world's established democracies into a single organization dedicated to joint action—what has been called a “League” or “Concert” of Democracies. The world's democracies are powerful and capable. Most important, they share an essential value in a globalizing world—a common dedication to ensuring the life, liberty, and happiness of free peoples.

MANDATE AND MEMBERSHIP

A Concert of Democracies would have three primary tasks: to help democracies confront their mutual security challenges, to promote economic growth and development among its members as well as globally, and to promote the expansion

of democracy and human rights. The concert would achieve these ends by providing a vehicle through which its members could share information, coordinate strategies, harmonize policies, and take action together. The concert would not just act on its own: its members would work through other international institutions, including the United Nations, to mobilize democracies and autocracies alike to meet pressing global challenges.

Who should be able to join the Concert of Democracies? One criterion for membership must be regular, free, and fair elections. But that is just a start. Concert members should also guarantee the rights of individuals within their countries. Their citizens must enjoy both fundamental political rights (to vote, organize, and participate in government) and basic civil rights (to speak, assemble, and freely practice their religion), and those rights must be guaranteed by the rule of law. Moreover, the commitment to uphold individual rights and govern by the rule of law should be so rooted in their societies that the chances of a reversion to autocratic rule are for practical purposes unthinkable. (The Community of Democracies launched in Warsaw in 2000 has far more relaxed admission criteria, which is why its membership has included such countries as Afghanistan, Bahrain, and Jordan.)

Roughly sixty countries meet the membership criteria of regular competitive elections, protection of individual rights, and the rule of law. This group includes the obvious candidates, such as the OECD countries, but it also includes such nations as Botswana, Brazil, Costa Rica, India, Israel, Mauritius, Peru, the Philippines, and South Africa. In other words, the Concert of Democracies would be composed of a diverse group of countries from around the globe—small and large, rich and poor, North and South, strong and weak. Conversely, most countries around the world would not be eligible for membership, at least not initially. Countries on the outside looking in at a concert could become candidates over time once they embrace democratic values. Indeed, one of the purposes of the concert is to give autocracies incentives to embrace democratic practices. NATO and the European Union have served precisely this function in encouraging eastern European countries to democratize. For that reason, the concert must have provisions such that any country that meets basic democratic criteria can become a member.

To deepen ties among democracies, the concert should seek to become a privileged trading group. By reducing tariffs and other trade barriers among its members, the concert would create a tangible economic premium for democratic

rule that would not only benefit members but also provide concrete incentives for other states to become democracies. Traditional democracy promotion efforts founder because they require direct interventions in autocratic governments. Democracies channel funds to pro-democracy groups, or they demand that autocracies change their behavior. Smart autocrats exploit both types of policies to stoke nationalist sentiments and discredit democracy activists as agents of foreign powers. A strategy that seeks to lure autocracies toward democratic government avoids tarnishing democracy activists and rewards countries that choose the democratic path on their own. The EU's success with former Soviet bloc countries is illustrative on this score.

The idea of a Concert of Democracies has come under attack, especially since Senator John McCain championed it during his presidential campaign.¹ The criticism is in many ways surprising. Democratic cooperation, after all, has long been at the heart of American foreign policy. NATO, the OECD, and bilateral security ties with such countries as Australia, Japan, and South Korea were never rooted in material or geopolitical interests alone. Rather, they are fundamentally based on and reflect shared democratic values, and they are by far our strongest ties by virtue of that fact. As successful as these arrangements have been, however, each is geographically confined, and none sees it as its mission to facilitate cooperation with the others. Most important, they all leave out emerging democratic powers, such as India, Brazil, and South Africa. By contrast, a Concert of Democracies offers the opportunity to recognize the changing global landscape and to engage new democratic partners.

WHY IT WILL WORK

But will these democracies want to work together? One criticism of the Concert of Democracies is that it rests on the illusion that “democracies share sufficient common interests to work effectively together.”² Of course, this complaint can be leveled against any large international institution—particularly those that critics of a Concert of Democracies prefer. The United Nations typically fails to bridge the differences among its members and, as a result, it usually endorses lowest-common-denominator actions or does nothing at all. Likewise, a “concert of great powers” that many so-called realists want to establish would inevitably founder over the fact that democracies and autocracies disagree not just on material interests but on the core values that should be embedded in the international system.

Democracies obviously are not immune to disagreement and discord. One has only to recall the transatlantic shouting match over Iraq in 2003 to see how bitterly they can disagree. But a Concert of Democracies does not depend on the mirage of common interests to succeed. Rather, it rests on two other premises. First, the world's democracies possess the greatest capacity to shape global politics: They deploy the greatest and most potent militaries, with the largest twenty democracies accounting for three-quarters of global defense spending. Democracies also account for most of the world's wealth, innovation, and productivity. Twenty-eight of the world's thirty largest economies are democracies. In the main, people living in democracies are better educated, more prosperous, healthier, and happier than the people who live in autocracies. Harnessing the power that comes from this overwhelming military, economic, political, and social advantage would provide the necessary ingredients for effective international action.

Second, democracies have a proven track record of bridging their differences and generating effective cooperation. Democracies work well together not just because they at times share common interests but because they share a commitment to the rule of law and the consent of the governed that enables them to trust one another. Intimidation and coercion are generally absent in their interactions. Conversely, relations between democracies and autocracies are always infused with suspicion and doubt. Will Russia respect the sovereignty of Georgia? Will China settle its differences with Taiwan peacefully? Democracies worry that the answer to these questions is "no" because autocracies often fail to keep their word.

What is most remarkable about democratic cooperation is that it has been achieved even though democracies are not in the habit, at least outside of the Atlantic Alliance, of thinking of themselves as a group. Brazilians think of the United States as a great power to the North. Italians think of Japan as an Asian power. Indians see Great Britain as a former colonial power. But the concert, by constructing a common identity among liberal democracies, will change how democracies interact and thereby further facilitate their cooperation.

ANSWERING THE CRITICS

Would a Concert of Democracies push the United Nations onto the ash heap of history? Some proponents certainly hope so.³ And these hopes alarm those who see the United Nations as the last, best hope for humanity. Efforts to turn a Concert of Democracies into a substitute for the UN are destined to fail. Support for

the UN is simply too deep and widespread. Just as important, efforts to use a Concert of Democracies to put the UN out of business *should* fail. By providing a forum where all the world's countries can participate, the UN serves a critical global function. Moreover, some of its specialized agencies, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Programme, and the World Health Organization, provide important services. Even the UN's most ardent supporters, however, admit that the organization on the whole does not work terribly well. Ban Ki-moon admitted as much upon becoming secretary-general when he promised to fix things during his tenure. His initial appointments and actions, though, hardly suggest significant change. Indeed, several decades of failed reform attempts make clear that a majority of UN members prefer the status quo, however imperfect it may be, and actively resist reform—radical or otherwise.

A robust Concert of Democracies would change that calculation. Just as in private business, international institutions benefit from competition.⁴ If the concert becomes effective at mobilizing cooperation, the UN will feel pressure to do likewise—or watch itself become irrelevant. Indeed, the concert could make UN reform one of its top priorities. As one of its first steps it should create a “D-60” to join the ranks of the P-5 and the G-8 to push for change at the United Nations. This would highlight the reality that a Concert of Democracies is not intended to replace the UN but to spur it to become more effective.

Could a Concert of Democracies succeed if it excludes powerful countries, such as China and Russia? Of course it could. Many successful international organizations do not count China and Russia as members. Neither country belongs to NATO, the European Union, or the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development. China does not belong to the G-8, and Russia stands (at least for now) outside the World Trade Organization. No one argues that these institutions are ineffective because their memberships are not universal. Again, the purpose of the Concert of Democracies is not to replace or supplant all other international institutions. A major part of its mission is to push, persuade, and cajole other international institutions as well as autocratic governments into taking action.

A related worry is that a Concert of Democracies could trigger a new cold war. Chinese and Russian leaders might view the concert as an effort to encircle and constrain them. Even if they do not respond by erecting a new iron curtain, they might refuse to cooperate with the concert on matters of mutual interest, or so the argument goes. Beijing and Moscow will no doubt denounce the

formation of a Concert of Democracies. After all, the concert's purpose is to forge a global order conducive to democratic political principles and hostile to autocratic ones. But why should democracies take their cues on permissible forms of cooperation from autocracies? Beijing and Moscow show no similar deference to democracies. From Asia to Africa to the Americas, they have aggressively sought to use their economic and military strength to shape the global order to suit their own interests at the expense of others.

This is not to say that the effort to create a Concert of Democracies will not require careful diplomacy. It will. It is to say that the dangers of alienating Beijing and Moscow are greatly overstated. To begin with, any attempt by Washington to use the concert to isolate China and Russia is pointless. There is no surer way to render the concert stillborn than to make it a vehicle for containing either country. Other democracies simply will not follow Washington's lead. By the same token, it is wrong to assume that just because Beijing and Moscow denounce a concert they will refuse to work with it. As realist thinkers have long preached, states act to advance their interests; they do not cut off their noses to spite their faces. Beijing and Moscow will cooperate on climate change and international financial issues when they see it in their interest to do so, not because democracies have declined to work together.

Most important, complaints that a Concert of Democracies will trigger a new cold war rest on an unpersuasive binary logic: Democracies either can work to advance their common interests and values or they can work with non-democracies. But no democracy faces this choice. They can do both. All major democracies, including the United States, have extensive public and private ties to all major authoritarian states. That is not going to change, and it should not change. If anything, the United States and other countries seeking to create a concert should individually and collectively work to improve their relations with autocratic governments. Bilateral relations can be strengthened; regional initiatives can be launched; and, perhaps most obviously, China can be invited to join the G-8.

The broader point is that the case for a Concert of Democracies is not axiomatically a case against great power cooperation or bilateral collaboration or regional relationships. We can and should try to create multiple partnerships. Indeed, in an age of globalization, attempts to craft a single venue for cooperation are futile. We are likely to be far better served by what Francis Fukuyama has called "multi-multilateralisms."⁵ These overlapping and cross-cutting political

networks are not only more likely to generate cooperation by creating new forums for action, they are also likely to make the international community far more durable and stable than one with only a few fault lines because they blur sharp divisions and create opportunities to build new coalitions.

LOOKING AHEAD

A Concert of Democracies will not magically solve global ills. It will not emerge on the international scene fully formed like Botticelli's Venus. Just as the European Union began with the small (in retrospect) step of coordinating coal and steel production and then took four decades to reach the point of creating a common currency, a concert will take time to build. It is most likely to succeed if its members begin with manageable challenges, such as developing a common agenda for reforming international institutions and coordinating their development programs. It is least likely to succeed—indeed, it is likely to fail—if it begins with the most difficult and controversial challenges, such as humanitarian intervention.

The task at hand is daunting. But before despairing over the work that needs to be done, it is worth asking if we can afford not to deepen democratic cooperation. The failure to bring democracies together will not mean sustaining an acceptable status quo; it will mean continued inadequate and ineffective responses to the many problems that now transcend international borders. If we do not press forward, we will fall back. That is our real choice.

NOTES

¹ See, among others, Thomas Carothers, "Is a League of Democracies a Good Idea?" *Foreign Policy for the Next President*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., May 2008; Charles Kupchan, "Minor League, Major Problems," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 6 (2008), pp. 96–109; and Stephen J. Stedman, "America and International Cooperation: What Role for a League of Democracies?" Stanley Foundation, Muscatine, Iowa, November 2008.

² Carothers, "Is a League of Democracies a Good Idea?" p. 1.

³ See, e.g., the comments by Richard Perle in "Democracies of the World, Unite," *American Interest* 2, no. 3 (2007), p. 17.

⁴ See Ruth Wedgwood, "Give the United Nations a Little Competition," *New York Times*, December 5, 2005.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006).