

The Dangers of Democratic Delusions

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The United States has the world's most sophisticated intelligentsia, including the finest universities to spawn the very best ideas. Despite this advantage, however, it can be seized by absolutely foolish notions. The liberation of Iraq was one such idea. Many influential American policy-makers and opinion-makers believed that an army of primarily U.S. and European soldiers (perceived, no doubt, as "Christian" soldiers) marching into an Islamic land in the twenty-first century would be received with rose petals thrown at their military boots. The price that America has paid for this delusion has been a huge loss in lives and cash, and deep national divisions. The Iraqi people have suffered even more.

America could well pay an equally heavy price for its latest delusion that the solution to the world's problems is to launch a "League of Democracies" to enable liberal democracies to work together to promote their values and interests. There can be no doubt that this idea will be disastrous. It will divide the world at the very time that a new global consensus needs to be created to address pressing global challenges: global warming, financial crises, epidemics, and nuclear proliferation, to name just a few. More dangerously, the 90 percent of the world's population who live outside the West will see this as a last-ditch effort by the West to continue to dominate world history, at a time when the era of Western domination is ending.¹ This idea will alienate precisely the populations that need to feel *included* in any global solution: the 1.3 billion Chinese and the 1.2 billion Muslims. So why are leading American minds advocating it?

Senator John McCain has been a strong advocate of a league, and has said that such an organization

could act when the UN fails—to relieve human suffering in places such as Darfur, combat HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, fashion better policies to confront environmental crises, provide unimpeded market access to those who endorse economic and

political freedom, and take other measures unattainable by existing regional or universal-membership systems. . . . By taking steps such as bringing concerted pressure to bear on tyrants in [Myanmar] or Zimbabwe, uniting to impose sanctions on Iran, and providing support to struggling democracies in Serbia and Ukraine, the League of Democracies would serve as a unique handmaiden of freedom.²

The simple assumption that McCain and other league advocates make is that on political challenges, such as Myanmar and Zimbabwe, democratic solidarity would trump geopolitical differences. But this assumption flies in the face of past U.S. behavior. If democratic solidarity were the driving force of U.S. foreign policy, the United States should have sided with democratic India against communist China in the cold war. Instead, because of legitimate geopolitical interests, the U.S. embraced China in 1972 (just after China had experienced major human rights violations during the Cultural Revolution, an issue that neither Nixon nor Carter raised with the Chinese) and even sided with the military dictators in Pakistan against democratic India. This is why the American idea for a League of Democracies has been received with little enthusiasm in India, the world's largest democracy. Indian leaders know that geopolitical interests always trump ideological commonalities.

Indeed, the United States' behavior in this regard is not exceptional. Every other country in the world puts its geopolitical interests first. South Africa, for example, is often feted (with good cause) for having one of the most successful democracies in Africa. Yet it had little sympathy for the efforts of Western democracies to isolate President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. No Western country would welcome a failed state at its doorstep. Neither would South Africa. The price of Western sanctions on Zimbabwe would be paid by South Africans, not the West. And while South Africa may have received some aid in consolation, this aid could just as easily dry up, as Pakistan discovered after the cold war. As soon as the cold war ended, Pakistan went from being an asset to a liability. It was then punished for its democratic deficiencies and left with the burden of taking care of millions of Afghan refugees. The Western record of solidarity with its non-Western allies through thick and thin has been poor, to say the least. This is why virtually no non-Western democracy has supported the idea of a League of Democracies. In turn, since a lot of Western discourse on democracy takes place in a self-referential, self-congratulatory manner, virtually no advocate of this league has stopped to ask this simple question: Why are non-Western democracies not supporting our grand idea?

Senator McCain specifically mentioned Myanmar. For a while, India was inclined to support the Western campaign to isolate Myanmar's military government, but it soon realized that this campaign would force the country into the hands of China and potentially create a Chinese satellite state on India's border. This was obviously against India's geopolitical interests; thus, India abandoned its support for Western policies and began to engage the government of Myanmar. The record of recent history shows that engagement leads to the opening up of societies (witness China), whereas isolation only preserves the status quo (Cuba, North Korea).

It is vital to emphasize here that in similar circumstances any Western democracy would likely carry out the same policies as India did with Myanmar or South Africa did with Zimbabwe. Western democracies do not have a track record of being more virtuous, as can be seen by two obvious examples. The first is Mexico, which became a full democracy only very recently. However, while it was run in a nondemocratic fashion by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) for more than seven decades, the United States imposed no sanctions on Mexico because it did not want a failing Mexican economy to lead to more migration into the United States. Similarly, in 1988 two countries had their democratic elections overturned by military regimes: Myanmar and Algeria. The European governments imposed sanctions on Myanmar because there was no cost to doing so, but they refrained from imposing sanctions on Algeria because they did not want more Algerian illegal immigrants. The Europeans were also not happy to see Islamist parties win elections in Algeria. Hence, they quietly supported the military regime.

If one goal of a League of Democracies is to create a sense of community among democracies across the world, it is vital to emphasize here that Western intentions toward the world are equally distrusted by both democratic and non-democratic Islamic societies. Few, if any, believe that the West is influenced only by benign, altruistic motives in pushing for such a league. The Muslims will see both a hidden agenda and a double standard. The double standards are obvious: no American government has ever tried to persuade Saudi Arabia to go democratic. The Muslims have also noticed that America pushes for elections in Palestine but that it punished the population of Gaza when they freely voted for Hamas, calling it a terrorist organization. Interestingly, when I served as Singapore's ambassador to the UN in the 1980s, several American diplomats tried to persuade me that Nelson Mandela, who was then in prison, was a terrorist.

Today, Mandela is an icon of democracy, yet it was not until 2008 that the U.S. Congress formally took Mandela off its list of terrorists. The point of this story is that Americans have to understand why their own checkered record in the promotion of democracy has led to a great deal of suspicion and distrust. And they should be focused on trying to remove this reservoir of suspicion and distrust rather than trying to create a new division that will only further aggravate this condition.

The fundamental problem with U.S. discourse on the subject of promoting democracy is that most Americans cannot see beyond their good intentions. So blinded, they fail to understand the wisdom contained in Max Weber's advice: "it is not true that good can follow only from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true." And a lot of evil can flow from the establishment of a League of Democracies. First, such a league will further accentuate the divide between the West and the rest of the world. While many in the West have forgotten their colonial past, memories of Western domination remain fresh in the minds of many nations. In China, for example, there is enormous suspicion of Western intentions. The Chinese remember vividly the Opium War, when the British seized Hong Kong because China refused to accept opium payments for Chinese tea. They also remember the foreign settlements in Shanghai, with such signs as "No Chinese and dogs in the park." And they have studied closely how the West cheered the "export" of democracy to Russia, even when the Russian people were clearly suffering from this democratic experiment. This is why the Chinese understand well the Russian bitterness toward the West.

Why are these historical memories important? They are important because they explain the context in which the idea of a league will be received. Indeed, there is a simple method to prove or disprove my objections: Since the presumed purpose of the idea is to benefit and not harm the 90 percent of the world's population that live outside the West, why not ask them for their opinion of such a league?

Let me suggest some responses that such a sampling would likely elicit. The 1.3 billion Chinese will, as I have said, receive the idea with great suspicion. The ferocious nationalist reaction in 2008 to Western protests over the Olympic Torch relay provides powerful evidence of current Chinese attitudes. Similarly, the world's 1.2 billion Muslims would scoff at any suggestion that the West is trying to help them with such a league. It is important to emphasize that anti-American sentiment is equally high, if not higher, in such leading Islamic democracies as

Indonesia, Turkey, and Pakistan as it is in such Islamic non-democracies as Syria, Egypt, or Bangladesh. Indeed, a leading women's rights activist in Malaysia, Zainah Anwar, the head of Sisters in Islam, tells me her organization cannot accept any Western money, including Western NGO money, because it would be "toxic." Clearly, the democratically elected politicians in Islamic countries would take great political risk if they were to support a U.S.-sponsored idea such as the league.

Attitudes in Africa and Latin America are no different. After a century or more of brutal Western colonization (including slavery), followed by disastrous Western domination of the continent, few Africans have faith in the good intentions of the West. Rather, today they are looking for forces to balance the West's influence in Africa—one reason why China is welcome in Africa, and why virtually all African leaders traveled to China to attend the China-Africa summit in 2006. Similarly, the recent spate of democratically elected leftist parties in several Latin American states (notably Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Venezuela) is at least one indicator of the population's political tendencies. Distrust of U.S. intentions has always been high in Latin America. As one of its most famous writers, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, reminds us, between 1824 and 1994 the United States carried out seventy-three invasions in countries of Latin America.³

Against this global backdrop, where do the proponents of a league expect the support to come from? And if there is so little support for the idea outside the collection of Western democracies, what would be the point of creating another Western club with token representation of a few non-Western states? One key argument made by the idea's proponents is that the league could compensate for the failures of the UN Security Council. According to this line of reasoning, if the Security Council is not able to engage in humanitarian intervention to protect endangered populations in such places as Kosovo or Rwanda, Darfur or Gaza, a League of Democracies would have the "legitimacy" to intervene without UNSC approval. Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay argue that a humanitarian intervention supported by democracies is more "legitimate" because, among other reasons, "Democracies are open to cooperation to preserve the common good—it is the very essence of how they govern within their own societies, after all—in a way that non-democracies very often are not."⁴ However, it is not clear what ethical principle makes foreign military intervention by democratic powers "legitimate." We know, for instance, that the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was democratically endorsed by the U.S. Congress and the British Parliament, yet we

also know that the vast majority of the world's population is firmly convinced that the Iraq war was both illegal and illegitimate. Clearly, endorsement by a few democratically elected governments does not make an intervention legitimate in the eyes of the world. Will endorsement by a few more—or even fifty—make it more so?

As a result of the spread of modernity and the creation of a new middle class in such societies as China and several Islamic states, we are seeing throughout the world the rise of populations that feel more enfranchised and empowered. These populations want to have a greater say in their political destinies. Hence, they support many of the values that underlie Western democratic political systems. All human beings want to support the Universal Declaration of Human Rights because no human being wants to be tortured or killed illegally or imprisoned with no legal recourse. Similarly, most governments of the world, including the Chinese government, understand that they ignore the wishes of their people at their own peril. The era of absolutist despotism of the likes of Stalin or Pol Pot or Kim II-sung or Ceaușescu is coming to an end. Instead, in one way or another, most societies are moving toward greater openness and more accountable governance, with or without democratic elections. The spirit of democracy is spreading.

In the spirit of democracy, we should work toward creating unifying institutions and processes that enable all the voices of the earth's 6.6 billion people to be heard. We should celebrate the fact that the vast majority of the world's population have gone from being objects of history to becoming subjects. Today, people want to play a major role in forging global decisions. They will no longer passively accept decisions made by such unrepresentative and undemocratic bodies as the G-8 or the UN Security Council. The proponents of the league misunderstand the nature of our era in proposing yet another divisive organization.

Of course, there is a body where all nations have an equal vote: the UN General Assembly. It is large and unwieldy. It has many cacophonous voices. It makes decisions slowly. It is full of political intrigues and constantly changing coalitions. In short, it functions just like any other national parliament. Sadly, the Western democracies have launched a ferocious campaign over several decades to marginalize the assembly. Many resolutions passed by the assembly are ignored by the United States and the West, even if they are adopted by overwhelming majorities. Several issues in particular divide the West and the rest of the world, including calls for increased funding for development and for

multilateral organizations. But the key issue that led to a joint U.S.-European decision basically to ignore the General Assembly has been that of Israel-Palestine. The great irony here is that the last military occupation of any non-sovereign territory in Palestine is supported and sustained by Western democracies, especially the United States. Israel could not sustain the occupation on its own. The only reason why Israel can defy the overwhelming majority of the world's population is because it has unconditional U.S. support and compliant European support. The tragedy here, as I have written several times, is that it does not serve Israel's interest to ignore the democratic voice of the majority of the world's population, which is expressed clearly in the UN General Assembly.

Most parliaments create political stability by providing a safety valve for expressing different and contending opinions. By ignoring and marginalizing the General Assembly, the Western democracies have deprived themselves of a valuable opportunity to hear the views of the majority of the world's population. Parliaments allow the disenchanted to express their anger, which helps to defuse dangerous situations. Indeed, a properly functioning General Assembly would reveal the wisdom of Winston Churchill's famous remark that "to jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war." In short, this is the fundamental problem with the idea of a league. If it is established, we will once again hear the views of a privileged few and ignore the views of the many. Rather, we must learn to listen to the voices of the many and respond to their interests and concerns. In this way we will move ever closer toward a world as politically stable as any national democracy. It can be done.

NOTES

¹ As I document in my latest book, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).

² John McCain, "An Enduring Peace Built on Freedom—Securing America's Future," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 6 (2007).

³ Translation of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's open letter to U.S. President George W. Bush regarding the September 11 attacks, "How does it feel?"

⁴ Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, "Democracies of the World, Unite," *American Interest* 2, no. 3 (2007).