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Upholding Democracy in a Post-Western Order

Richard Youngs

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Introduction

Many Western analysts and policymakers increasingly see the world in terms of a geopolitical struggle between the West and a loosely affiliated set of autocratic, non-Western powers, especially China and Russia. Many of these thinkers tend to assume that the liberal parts of the global order derive almost exclusively from Western international influences. This mentality sometimes breeds the view that the struggle between democracy and autocracy—or liberalism and illiberalism—inherently pits Westerners against non-Westerners.

This view distorts and oversimplifies how Western and non-Western influences have shaped democracy and authoritarianism worldwide. Many non-Western powers are democratic, and these countries are making at least some efforts to support democracy beyond their borders. Those who overlook this fact and the significance of positive non-Western influences on democracy miss an important dimension of the international order and its ongoing evolution.

Non-Western democracy support is no more than tentative but is not always radically different from Western norms and practices. In fact, Western and non-Western democracy support policies are experiencing similar problems and are struggling to retain traction against a sustained pushback from antidemocratic forces. These shared difficulties make it more important that democracy's supporters work together across the boundaries between Western and non-Western states. Successful collaboration will be crucial in determining whether support for democratic norms retains a place in the reshaped global order. The retrenchment of U.S. President Donald Trump and his administration from democracy support makes it even more important that other democracies—in all regions—coordinate effectively to defend democratic norms internationally.

Democracy and the Liberal Order Misconstrued

Two important global trends are unfolding in parallel. The basic tenets of the liberal international order look increasingly fragile and, at the same time, democracy is under assault in many countries around the world. Against this backdrop, most Western writers tend to assume that the future of democracy is largely inseparable from the fate of the West. The standard argument is that declining Western power, along with creeping illiberalism in the United States and many European countries, is likely to tip the scales decisively against democracy.

To cite one recent example, Yascha Mounk and Roberto Foa have posited that global geopolitics is a struggle between the declining “liberal democratic alliance” of Western states and rising authoritarian states like China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia.¹ They argue that democracy's erstwhile appeal and strength have largely resulted from Western economic hegemony. They predict that as this hegemony begins to wane, democracy will begin to lose its broader worldwide appeal too. These authors explicitly reject the notion that democratic non-Western states can have any

counterbalancing effect in this struggle. Similarly, Robert Kagan argues provocatively in his new book that once the United States steps back from underwriting the liberal order, “the jungle will grow back.”² Most Western books about the future global order still tend to be framed in terms of so-called Western values needing to be defended from the rest of the world, which figures only as a menace to democracy.³

Many observers outside the West denounce such accounts for downplaying or even completely discounting any positive non-Western influence over global democracy. Even when, with avowedly progressive intent, analysts may call for non-Western values to be taken more seriously in the reshaping of the global order, they invariably take this to mean nondemocratic influences.⁴ In line with this thinking, it might be that the future international system retains some liberal or partially liberal elements yet is not especially democratic. Many Western analysts assume that democracy can only prosper globally if it is defended and advanced by Western powers.

These analysts have long assumed that international democracy support is a Western enterprise and that non-Western powers have been hostile toward such policies. They habitually suppose that Western democracies pursue democracy support policies against the active opposition of non-Western powers. As this non-Western resistance gains ground, the thinking goes, the place of democracy in international geopolitics and the global order will come under greater threat. Proponents of this view frame much of the debate in terms of how far non-Western powers fall short of the West’s supposedly strong, principled commitment to democracy.

This standard portrayal of worldwide democracy is not entirely incorrect, but it is unduly one-dimensional in light of several non-Western powers’ emerging efforts to support democratic reforms beyond their borders. The term non-Western, as used here, refers to countries other than those in Europe and North America (as well as Australia) that have been implementing democracy support policies for many years. This group includes several major powers that have introduced or upgraded their democracy support in the last ten years, such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, Japan, Turkey, and South Africa. There may be debate about whether some of these countries are best defined strictly as non-Western, but that term is used here simply as shorthand for countries that did not traditionally show interest in democracy support but have gradually begun to do so. Emerging democracy supporters might be an alternative and fuller term.

Overlooked Non-Western Democracy Support

To some observers, the idea of non-Western democracy support is complete anathema. The standard view is that international democracy support is unique to European countries and the United States, with some backing from Australia, Canada, and a few international bodies and initiatives. The notion of democracy support sits uneasily alongside the stress that non-Western powers commonly place on nonintervention and sovereign autonomy.

But some non-Western states have developed modest forms of democracy support. The pertinent point is not to oversell the scale or effectiveness of these efforts, as they are certainly no more than sporadic, partial, and tepid. Yet the trend is meaningful enough to cast doubt on the assumption that only Western powers are at all interested in fostering democracy as a global norm.

These emerging non-Western democracy supporters often rhetorically stress how central democratic values are to their foreign policies. In recent years, many of these countries have engaged in diplomacy aimed at protecting or advancing democracy in certain instances. In the Western Hemisphere, for example, Brazil took on a leading role in Haiti's political and economic reconstruction, while pushing for Latin American regional bodies such as Mercosur and the Organization of American States to adopt strong democracy protection clauses. Moreover, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile reacted strongly to a 2009 military coup in Honduras and responded to a quite different type of coup against Paraguay's sitting president in 2012. At these same states' behest, the Organization of American States has an Inter-American Democracy Charter, and most other Latin American collective organizations have democracy clauses in their bylaws aimed mainly at defending incumbent regimes from coup attempts.

On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, several Asian countries have begun promoting democracy more actively. Indonesia pushed hard for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to incorporate into the group's 2008 charter several dialogue forums on democracy support and a commitment to defending democratic norms. Jakarta has oriented itself as a leading diplomatic advocate for political reforms in Myanmar and, to some extent, in Cambodia and Vietnam as well. Meanwhile, India played a major role in helping the Nepalese government and Maoist insurgents reach a democratic peace deal in 2006, and New Delhi has pressured Kathmandu in recent years to update the country's constitution to be more inclusive of its ethnic and linguistic diversity. Additionally, India has developed many pro-democracy initiatives and diplomatic efforts in Sri Lanka.

Elsewhere, before Turkey's own authoritarian reversal deepened, Ankara initially positioned itself as perhaps the most engaged external player in the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 and committed itself to supporting democratic change in the region. While Turkey's domestic politics have moved in an authoritarian direction, the country still runs some external support programs related to democracy. Meanwhile, South Africa pushed for a democratic resolution to a 2011 electoral crisis in Côte d'Ivoire and has sought to build democracy concerns into regional conflict prevention initiatives. While democracy initiatives in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa remain tentative and limited, Turkey and South Africa have, in some cases, gone against the grain and supported concrete pro-democracy initiatives in their respective regions.

Many of these non-Western democracies have invested money in democracy support and have established aid programs that include meaningful amounts of financial backing for political

reform initiatives. India has channeled increasing amounts of overseas aid through its Development Partnership Administration, which was created in 2012. While New Delhi does not have a formal category of democracy aid, some of this new aid goes to governance-related projects including a large-scale external election monitoring operation. Through a unit of its electoral commission focused specifically on external support, India has deployed sizable teams and significant resources to train electoral officials and monitor elections in countries like Egypt, Libya, Namibia, and South Africa.

India is not alone in this respect. Indonesia began funding what it terms South-South cooperation on democratic governance after 2010. The country's Institute for Peace and Democracy has run a wide range of democracy assistance initiatives in Myanmar and other ASEAN countries, gradually moving into more sensitive areas such as security sector reform. Meanwhile, since the late 2000s, Japan has rolled out a widening portfolio of aid projects covering election assistance, police reforms, and the rule of law—efforts that amounted to a few hundred million dollars per year by the late 2000s.⁵ Similarly, Turkey's sizable aid budget includes an array of funding for judicial reforms, civil society, security-sector reforms, and institution building, even though Ankara does not have an explicit category for democracy support.⁶ For its part, South Africa funds election observers in many other African countries.

Non-Western states' commitment to democracy support is driven by a combination of country-specific, identity-related values and strategic interests. In Asia, leading countries like Japan and India see democracy support as a means of pushing back against China's rise. For large emerging countries like Brazil and Indonesia, advocacy for democratic causes offers a way to reinforce their claims to regional leadership. And for other actors, like Turkey's ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), democracy promotion can be a means of backing close ideological affiliates in other countries.

Apart from strategic calculations, non-Western democracy promoters tend to stress the importance of values. For Indian politicians, the country's democratic identity is existential because they insist that only democracy can hold together such a large, diverse citizenry. Indian officials frequently refer to India's status as the world's most populous democracy, a democracy that has thrived despite the challenges of extensive poverty and an extremely diverse polity in religious, linguistic, and ethnic terms. And South Africa portrays its support for democracy elsewhere in Africa as a natural extension of its own achievement of multiracial democracy at home. Considerations of identity can sometimes be more overt in the rhetoric of these emerging democracies than they are in the discourse of Western democratic states.

More Different in Degree Than Kind

Despite these trends, analysts still commonly assume that Western powers' international support for democracy is of a completely and qualitatively different order to that of non-Western efforts.

Yet, while these emerging powers' commitment to democracy is undoubtedly patchy and less than fulsome, it is worth noting that Western democracy support increasingly shares many of these limitations and this tepidness. That is to say, much Western democracy support today has itself become relatively indirect, largely second-order, and merely declaratory. The standard assumption that Western countries' commitment to democracy is qualitatively distinctive and of a completely different magnitude to that of other powers can easily be overstated.

This problem of unexamined assumptions runs both ways. The perceptions that Western and non-Western democracies have about each other tend to be rather caricatured. Non-Western powers often accuse Western governments of forcefully seeking to impose democracy on other countries. Western governments, in turn, tend to accuse non-Western powers of unconditionally cozying up with even the most authoritarian regimes. Non-Western democracies sometimes insist that, unlike Western powers, they strive to disassociate their democracy support from particular political models and geopolitical interests; these emerging democracy supporters tend to claim that they link democracy support to issues of social justice, peaceful mediation, and local values to a greater extent than Western policymakers do.

A comparison of Western and non-Western democracy assistance casts doubt on the standard binary portrayal of strong Western commitments to democracy juxtaposed by antidemocratic non-Western influences. Of course, Western governments have led the international democracy promotion agenda and generally lay claim to stronger engagement on issues related to democracy and human rights compared with the efforts of non-Western powers. Yet this apparent divide is far from absolute. Non-Western policies of democracy support are not uniformly weaker or worse than Western policies. Conversely, neither are non-Western powers' typical characterizations of Western policy entirely fair. While there are certainly differences between Western and non-Western approaches to democracy support, the similarities and common weaknesses are at least as striking.

Aid Priorities

The most committed Western powers spend more on democracy assistance than non-Western democracies do, and they fund a wider range of political and civic partners. The most active democracy supporters—countries like Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States—each spend at least several hundred million dollars on political aid each year.⁷

The European Commission funds democracy work using several different budget lines; its European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, for instance, allocates more than 160 million euros a year.⁸ The United States remains the largest single democracy funder worldwide, devoting more than \$2 billion a year to such work.⁹ The U.S. Congress has so far helped preserve high levels of spending on democracy and human rights after Trump signalled that he wanted to

dramatically cut spending on foreign affairs.¹⁰ In Germany and the United States, there are dozens of actors, departments, and party foundations involved in democracy and human rights support. Direct comparisons between countries in this area are notoriously difficult, as donors define their political aid very differently. Yet, in a very general sense, it can be said that non-Western democracies lack this kind of large-scale, heavily institutionalized, and broad-ranging funding architecture.

However, in at least some respects, the nature of non-Western powers' democracy assistance is not qualitatively different from that of Western aid. Countries like Brazil, Indonesia, and Turkey fund a familiar range of democracy-related training and capacity-building projects. They support work on election management, decentralization, security sector reform, anticorruption measures, and inclusive peace settlements—a repertoire that has much in common with Western democracy aid. Admittedly, non-Western democracies are perhaps a little more reluctant than Western donors to support highly adversarial civil society organizations; however, many Western actors are growing more cautious about this too. Japan mostly focuses on governance assistance to state institutions, the same kind of support that accounts for the largest share of EU governance aid. Similarly, South Africa's focus on security sector reform in conflict states or fragile environments mirrors the way some Western countries have increasingly prioritized such efforts. And while increasingly authoritarian Turkey is redirecting some political aid to humanitarian initiatives, most European donors have similarly begun to prioritize humanitarian relief for migrants in recent years.

One general difference is that non-Western democracies tend to direct aid to neighboring countries, while Western donors have a more global reach; in many cases, the main aid recipients for each of the aforementioned non-Western democracies are other countries in close proximity to the donor countries themselves.¹¹ Yet this difference may be narrowing in some instances. Turkish and Japanese aid, for example, is expanding into Africa, while Indonesia and India have undertaken democracy initiatives in the Middle East.

Critical Pressure

As for the degree of critical pressure and the number of sanctions that democracy supporters bring to bear against nondemocratic regimes, the divide between Western and non-Western actors is gray rather than black-and-white. This is not to question the fact that non-Western powers generally dislike heavily punitive foreign policy instruments. Rather, the point is that the difference between them and Western democracies is one of degree and not a qualitative schism. Admittedly, initiatives like Indonesia's Bali Forum for Democracy that espouse engagement with authoritarian regimes under a banner of democracy support do indeed lack any directly comparable Western counterparts.

Yet it is equally true that the list of nondemocratic regimes the EU and the United States maintain close and cordial relations with is extremely long. The EU has been increasing aid to authoritarian governments in Algeria, Egypt, Somalia, and Sudan particularly to help these countries bear down on radical jihadi groups and stem migration flows to Europe. In late 2017, the EU and the government of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi signed a new development aid package that runs to 2020 worth up to 528 million euros.¹² The EU remains Egypt's largest donor, and when the 2017 agreement was signed, the EU had more than 1.3 billion euros worth of ongoing aid projects there.¹³ While Brussels has fought to retain some support for civil society, most European aid goes directly to the Egyptian regime, even as Cairo continues its dramatically authoritarian turn. Similarly, in the fall of 2017, the EU held a summit with Central Asian autocratic leaders, offering a raft of new cooperation agreements. The EU collectively and its member states individually have struck new security deals with the likes of Saudi Arabia, while recently offering new cooperation accords to Belarus and Azerbaijan.

Washington has a lengthy track record of offering support and aid to authoritarian partners too. Most recently, Trump has spoken positively about the nondemocratic governments of Bahrain, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, among others. The United States continues to provide large amounts of aid—whether economic, military, or both—to various nondemocratic governments, including in Pakistan and Rwanda. While the U.S. government did decide in 2017 to withhold some aid from Egypt to protest the Egyptian government's antidemocratic practices, Trump was the first leader to call Sisi and congratulate him for his March 2018 electoral victory, and for now Washington continues to provide sizable military aid to Cairo.

If leading Western democracy supporters often lent a hand to authoritarian regimes, conversely non-Western democracies have often called out nondemocratic behavior. In Asia, Japan has imposed democracy-related sanctions in a similar range of cases to Western democracy promoters (like in the case of Myanmar, for example), while India used its Commonwealth membership to exert strong pressure on Sri Lanka for its treatment of Tamils. Similarly, Turkey has been critical of democratic backsliding in Middle Eastern countries like Egypt, Syria, and, more recently, Tunisia.

Similarly, in Latin America, the measures Argentina, Brazil, and Chile took in response to coups in Honduras in 2009 and Paraguay in 2012 were more assertive and principled than those adopted by the United States. In fact, the measures Buenos Aires, Brasília, and Santiago employed exceeded the steps the EU took against democratic reversals in its neighborhood and in response to the 2013 Egyptian coup. Latin American governments have often struggled to deploy the democracy clauses now included in many of the continent's regional organizations, but the EU likewise has failed to invoke its punitive clauses and mechanisms against democratic backsliding in countries like Hungary and Poland.

Of course, events in Venezuela provide perhaps the highest profile example of the complex variation in international democracy support. For many years, Latin American countries generally favored dialogue with Venezuela and eschewed the harshness of many U.S. positions against the *chavista* regime of former president Hugo Chávez and his successor. The United States and the EU imposed targeted sanctions against members of President Nicolás Maduro's government in 2017 and 2018; Latin American democracies have not imposed such punitive measures. However, Latin American positions have hardened in the latest phase of Venezuela's crisis—in part because the regime's repression has intensified in the last two years, and in part because several more right-wing governments have won power in the region. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and other regional democracies in the so-called Lima Group (with the exceptions of Mexico and non-member observer Uruguay) moved quickly to recognize Juan Guaidó after the opposition leader declared himself interim president in January 2019. In doing so, these Latin American states were aligned with the United States and Canada, and ahead of the slightly more cautious positions adopted by EU member states. The EU has called for elections, but also dialogue; after waiting for over a week after Guaidó's declaration, a number of EU member states recognized the change of president, but others like Italy and Greece declined to take this step.

In general, Western diplomats may remonstrate impatiently that non-Western democracies are failing to be tough on dictators, but their own record on this front is poor too. Conversely, non-Western diplomats are often wide of the mark when they accuse Western powers of coercively imposing democracy in blanket uniformity around the world. Meanwhile, some conservative U.S. commentators caustically dismiss non-Western democracies' liberal credentials because such countries invariably oppose U.S.-led military interventions. Yet some of the most liberal Western governments are themselves far from unalloyed interventionists—think of Canada and the Nordic states. More broadly, equating democracy support with military invasions is distorting and unhelpful.

Western and non-Western democracies may disagree over how to treat a particular regime or leader, but this is not, in and of itself, a sign of qualitatively different approaches to democracy support. Like non-Western powers, Western governments find it easier to cooperate on democracy building with reformers in countries that have already made a basic democratic breakthrough than with democrats living under still-authoritarian regimes. For both sets of actors, democracy support tends to follow political change rather than preempt it. Like many non-Western democracies, the EU and the United States tend to react with punitive measures when an overt violation like a military coup occurs, but they struggle to respond to less dramatic, more incremental erosions of democratic norms. In some countries, the West may be more critically focused on democracy than non-Western powers are. But in other countries, strategic calculations may run the other way, making non-Western democracies tougher on certain autocratic regimes than their Western counterparts are.

Ideological Affinity

A common view is that Western and non-Western states think of democracy in fundamentally different ways. Western policymakers habitually claim that democracy support is not about supporting particular leaders or parties but about upholding neutral institutional rules and rights. By contrast, non-Western democracies tend to cultivate ideological camaraderie with likeminded partners rather than prioritizing democratic norms as such. Such instrumental logic can be quite dissonant when compared to Western rhetoric that has been fine-tuned through years of trial-and-error into more sensitive, politically correct narratives.

Sometimes it is certainly true that non-Western powers see the calculus surrounding democracy support in terms of aiding parties they like or undermining leaders they dislike. They often exert pro-democracy pressure against nondemocratic foes but indulge illiberal allies. For instance, when Turkey was highly critical of the 2013 coup in Egypt, its stance arguably was more about the fact that Egyptians had dislodged an Islamist president than it was about them overthrowing a formally democratic government per se. Similarly, when India adopted a democracy-focused narrative aimed at Sri Lanka specifically in defense of the country's Tamil minority, this was in part because India's own Tamil population pushed for such a position. In Latin America, democracy support has become entwined with left-wing versus right-wing political competition across the region. The strongest criticism of nondemocratic trends in countries ruled by leftist regimes—like Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—has come from regional governments on the opposite side of the political spectrum. The deepening of Venezuela's political crisis has accentuated the left-right divide: right-wing governments in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Colombia have supported Guaidó, whereas left-wing administrations in Bolivia, Cuba, Mexico, and Nicaragua have defended Maduro and insist that it is Guaidó's actions that are antidemocratic.

However, despite rhetorical niceties, current Western democracy commitments, in practice, are often distorted by the same kinds of ideological affinities that characterize non-Western policies. Both Western and non-Western foreign policy may be rooted in some democracy-based identity markers, but these are all overlain by other kinds of identities and allegiances. Trump has based more of his diplomatic outreach on geopolitical loyalty than on adherence to democratic norms, voicing admiration for strongmen and autocrats willing to work with the United States while ratcheting up pressure on those more at odds with Washington. While he has generally stepped back from active democracy promotion, Trump has played a high-profile role in Venezuela, imposing new sanctions on the Venezuelan government and proactively coordinating with opposition leaders there to oust Maduro from power. His administration has also reinstated a harsher Cuba policy. In these somewhat atypical cases, the administration's discourse has emphasized the strategic logic behind democracy support.

As for the EU, the European People's Party has overlooked the domestic authoritarian abuses of its co-ideologue, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. And in the Middle East, Washington and Brussels alike have been vastly more stringent toward some Islamist parties and movements than toward, for example, the Fatah government in the Palestinian West Bank.

The Limits of Experience Sharing

Non-Western powers at times berate Western governments for intrusively and insensitively foisting their own political models on very different societies. Yet non-Western democracies themselves tend to base their external democracy support initiatives on their own democratic transitions. Sharing lessons from their own past experience is often rising democracies' favored and most frequent approach to democracy support. Indeed, in this sense non-Western democracies bring useful, innovative, and different experiences to the subject of international democracy promotion. Many governments and civic activists struggling with democratization challenges clearly welcome exposure to such advice.

But it is less clear whether non-Western states' democracy support is based on fine-tuned democratic models that are radically different from or obviously more effective than those that Western governments follow. The mere sharing of experience alone does not constitute a democracy support strategy. Countries like Brazil, India, and Indonesia tend to stress the importance of consensus, justice, inclusion, and conflict mediation for societies wracked by internal diversity and inequality; in doing so, these countries often insist that their own democratic governance of staggeringly diverse countries is more relevant to most developing states than Western liberal democracy. Yet these states' democracy promotion initiatives are often too partial and ad hoc to constitute a comprehensive, distinctive model of democratic politics or political change. Moreover, the ways such supporters promote values like inclusion, social justice, and power sharing can often—although not always—resemble comparable Western, and certainly European, programs.

Intragroup Variation

The complex blend of aforementioned similarities and differences muddy any attempt to draw an overly stark divide between the respective democracy support initiatives of the West and the rest. Beyond that, the considerable variation *within* each side of this purported divide further cautions against broad generalizations.

Each non-Western power approaches democracy through a slightly different prism, so there is no single non-Western approach to international democracy support. Some non-Western democracies favor civil society (Chile, for example), while others prioritize support for state actors to help control top-down transitions (Brazil). Some non-Western countries (such as South Africa) resist the notion of distinctively non-Western religious and cultural norms, while others

(like India) pursue such variation as a central part of their foreign policy agendas. For some non-Western states, democracy support is essentially a spin-off of conflict resolution policies (in the case of Indonesia), while for others such support is subsumed under efforts to foster inclusive social development (as Japan and South Korea have done). Domestic factors differ by country: states like Brazil and India have vibrant nongovernmental organizations that push their governments to do more to support human rights and democratic norms, whereas civil society pressure is weaker in other countries. Similarly, nationalist parties and defense establishments are stronger countervailing actors in some non-Western democracies than in others.

These differences occur, at least in part, because non-Western democracies have evolved differently over time. For its part, Turkey became an assertive advocate of dramatic change in many Arab states in 2011; as it has become more authoritarian since then, Ankara has not entirely abandoned democracy support, but the government has begun to approach this aid more overtly through the lens of sectarian identity. Elsewhere, countries like Indonesia and Chile, in contrast, have made steady, incremental progress in terms of rights protection and conflict mediation, while retaining a relatively low diplomatic profile. Meanwhile, Argentina's change of government in 2015 shifted its foreign policy modestly in a pro-democracy direction. Elsewhere, concerned about China's rise, Japan has started approaching questions of democracy from an increasingly geopolitical perspective. India has been prompted to take pro-democracy actions by domestic political forces and by opportunities in its immediate neighborhood. South Africa has advanced little and possesses arguably the most underutilized democratic potential of all these rising powers.

On the Western side, a lot of variation is evident as well. The United States' sui generis evolution under Trump looks very different from the steadfast democratic commitments of states like Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Likewise, the foreign policies of other countries like Italy and Spain that are more cautious about external democracy support are probably closer to the policies of Brazil than to the democratic enthusiasm of the Nordic states. Many of the features that non-Western democracies say distinguish their approaches from Western strategies are the same as those that the EU normally lists as distinguishing its approach from that of the United States.

In sum, the tendency to magnify differences sometimes obscures significant similarities in the aid priorities and ideological idiosyncrasies that Western and non-Western democracies often share.

A Track Record of Limited Cooperation

Today, many analysts voice concerns about creeping democratic regression and authoritarian resurgence. These trends offer no clear-cut divide between Western and non-Western states. Amid democracy's lackluster performance, liberal rights are under siege in all parts of the world.

Admittedly, democracy advocates appear to be on the back foot in many of the non-Western states that have been developing democracy support initiatives in recent years. The 2018 Varieties of Democracy index reported that Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Turkey are among the world's main democratic backsliders.¹⁴ Turkey has drifted back most clearly toward authoritarianism, but it is not alone. Brazil's new president, Jair Bolsonaro, openly admires the country's former military junta. And quite apart from whatever threat to democracy Bolsonaro personally might represent, Brazil has been mired in a series of corruption cases that have left its political class deeply discredited. Elsewhere, the quality of South Africa's democracy has declined on a number of fronts as internal disputes within the governing African National Congress dominate the country's politics. And in India, critics accuse Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government of stoking intolerance and restricting minority rights, while similar trends are afoot in Indonesia.

When the debate about non-Western democracies first took off, it was focused on these countries' successes and their appeal to other reformers around the world. The picture now is a more troubled one. There are still democratic successes outside the West, and many rising powers continue to make quiet, almost unnoticed progress toward more pluralistic political systems. But overall political trends have shifted. While previously many analysts and policymakers were focused preeminently on the advances that non-Western democracies were making, today they are equally concerned with the backsliding that afflicts some of these states.

That said, democracy's troubles are, if anything, even more sobering in the West. Freedom House's 2018 report foregrounds the worrying state of democracy in several European countries.¹⁵ The Economist Intelligence Unit's 2018 Democracy Index shows that since 2006 Western Europe and Eastern Europe have witnessed the heaviest falls in democratic quality of all regions.¹⁶ The index also downgraded the United States from a full democracy to a flawed one. It seems relatively clear that these internal challenges have an impact on external democracy support. Writers such as G. John Ikenberry, Joseph Nye, and Larry Diamond have recently argued that the link between Western democracies' poor internal health and external democracy support is becoming a dominant factor: the thinking goes that it is because democracy is treading water in the West that nondemocratic powers are emboldened to undo elements of the liberal order and are gaining influence internationally.¹⁷

Interestingly enough, these trends mean that some non-Western countries will be both providers and recipients of democracy support. One curious implication of non-Western democracies' problems is that these countries may in some cases continue to be *targets* of Western democracy support, even as they seek to engage, through their own foreign policy initiatives and as aid donors themselves, in political processes beyond their borders. This democracy-related dynamic is one example of a broader feature of the emerging global order: non-Western countries will be both subjects and objects of international politics; they will wield significant international power, even as they remain internally brittle and combustible.

While the negative connections between democracies' domestic political trends and the politics of the global order are powerful, they vary between countries in ways that do not constitute a neat Western-versus-others divide. For one thing, Trump's mercurial governing style is causing uncertainty and leaving myriad blemishes on Washington's international credibility as a democracy supporter. Meanwhile, some Latin American states and Japan are modestly increasing their democracy support. While the domestic politics of India, Indonesia, and Turkey are becoming more illiberal, this is not completely suppressing their external democracy support but rather giving it a more instrumental, geopolitical edge. Turkey has regressed so much toward autocracy that it might seem significant that Ankara engages in any kind of pro-democracy activity at all. In Indonesia, President Joko Widodo has downgraded the country's focus on democracy support since 2014, but projects through the Institute for Peace and Democracy have continued largely as before.

As these challenges to democracy mount in Western and non-Western states alike, it is striking how little coordination there is between the two groups. Indeed, efforts to develop cooperation on democracy support have atrophied and lost steam in recent years. Western governments began to tout ideas for cooperation with non-Western democracies around a decade ago, an overture that was not enthusiastically received. One early concern non-Western democracies had about such efforts was that Western governments would aggressively push them to back controversial Western-led foreign interventions. Non-Western states were ambivalent about international democracy support in part because they feared they would end up doing the West's geostrategic bidding and that they would be too closely associated with a Western agenda. Understandably, such countries have been reluctant to sign up for policies that they had little part in designing.

Many policymakers in non-Western democracies still define their own approaches to democracy support in contrast to what they judge to be typical Western approaches. This continues to be the case even when their perceptions of Western policies are dated and inaccurate, just as Western judgments about non-Western policies are often overly haughty and dismissive. This is significant in part because it suggests that these governments still feel they need to justify their foreign policy agendas to domestic audiences in terms of being anti-Western or at least non-Western. This preoccupation with contrasts is notable because the rhetoric of being fundamentally different from the West is usually not reflected in the finer details of external democracy support initiatives.

Dialogue about the high politics of democracy support remains conspicuously absent from the plethora of international forums that now link Western and non-Western states. Both sides appear to have lost interest in finding ways to cooperate more systematically on democracy support. Proposals for a concert or league of democracies were raised and circulated briefly in the mid-2000s. But neither Western nor non-Western governments pursued these ideas with any

conviction, and such thinking soon subsided. European governments were (justifiably) unenthusiastic, fearing that such groupings would undermine the United Nations (UN).

There are a few democracy-focused groups that involve limited coordination between Western states and at least a few non-Western counterparts, but their impact has been negligible to date. A gathering called the D-10 Strategy Forum gathers officials and senior diplomats from ten democracies, but this group includes only two states that might be defined as non-Western (Japan and South Korea).¹⁸

Launched in 2000, the Community of Democracies (CoD) is sometimes cited as a forum for wider cooperation. This organization now has 106 members and runs many projects and dialogue forums, but it has fallen short of initial ambitions and has recently lost momentum. The United States has become increasingly ambivalent about the CoD; in 2017, the Trump administration hesitated over whether to hold a long-planned CoD summit in Washington, DC, before finally deciding to do so at the last minute; in the end, this meant that fewer ministers from member states attended than otherwise might have. An additional wrinkle is that the CoD includes many nondemocratic states as well, complicating its utility as an operational democracy support body and making it more akin to a venue for inclusive dialogue. That said, a thirty-member Governing Council has been formed to streamline decisionmaking processes. Still, while the CoD runs useful low-level initiatives, it has neither gained high-level strategic traction nor become a central pillar of most states' foreign policies.¹⁹

It is abundantly clear that different countries' positions and interests on a whole range of strategic questions do not fall neatly along a division between democracies and nondemocracies. Over time, the pendulum of democracy's global standing has swung from one extreme to another: in the early 2000s, it was common to hear particularly U.S. politicians and experts—neoconservatives and liberals—talk about strategically dividing democracies from autocracies. Then democracy nearly disappeared from the diplomatic agenda entirely for a time. The Trump administration appears to be shifting back to a democracies-versus-autocracies view of the world. Yet while the 2018 U.S. National Security Strategy stresses this dichotomy and refers to a “community of like-minded democratic states,” it conspicuously makes no reference at all to democracy support; this suggests that realpolitik considerations will take precedence over any such democracy-based groupings.²⁰

Given the perceived differences between Western and non-Western democracies and the modest progress attained by groups like the CoD to date, it is not surprising that the possibility of cooperation between the two sides is still talked about in only very vague and generic terms. When specific challenges or openings for joint action arise, neither Western nor non-Western governments seek out practical cooperation.

The EU insists it is upgrading relations with other democracies, a commitment that led to the launch of a coalition with thirteen such countries at the UN in the autumn of 2018. However,

this initiative is focused on promoting positive stories about human rights mainly in those thirteen states, so it does not appear to be concerned with deeper coordination on external democracy support.

In a more targeted initiative, at the beginning of February 2019, the EU launched an international contact group for Venezuela; for a limited ninety-day period, this group was tasked with getting European and Latin American states to work together to help Venezuela's political transition.²¹ This was a promising and unprecedented call for cross-regional cooperation on democracy support in one particular country. How far this was about fully coordinating the international approach to Venezuela's predicament was uncertain, however. To some degree, the EU suggested the group as a way of actually distancing itself from the Trump administration and of emphasizing a cautious, mediation-based approach. While the rightward shift in several Latin American governments has led to more criticism of the Maduro regime, most in the region remain wary about aligning too actively with the United States.

Western and non-Western democracies do occasionally work together to craft thematic or country resolutions through the UN Human Rights Council; this coordination is often successful but remains low-key. Relevant policymaking structures are not set up to ensure that any general interest in such cooperation filters through to tangible policy initiatives, a failure that is equally evident in Western ministries, non-Western governments, and international bodies.

Like the limited cooperation between Western and non-Western democracies, coordination among non-Western democracies themselves is strikingly and surprisingly lacking.²² In Asia, for instance, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea have failed to join forces with respect to Myanmar's political opening. Cooperation between Asian democracies was limited in response to the latest military coup in Thailand in 2014 as well. Meanwhile, two of the region's largest democracies—India and Japan—do not even have a formal agreement on democracy promotion. The emergence of the Quad (a grouping that includes Australia, India, Japan, and the United States) is an incipient effort to rectify this situation and create a democratic bloc in the region to counter an authoritarian China. It remains unclear, however, whether this coalition will help fashion practical coordination on democracy support alongside its primary focus on security issues.

Cooperation on democracy support among other major emerging democracies around the world has been very modest too. Brazil, India, and South Africa are held back from supporting democracy more strongly by their desire to craft an interlocking set of partnerships with Russia and China under the BRICS banner. The more democratic India-Brazil-South Africa (IPSA) Dialogue Forum has certainly issued many statements stressing support for democracy and human rights as well as references to civil society cooperation.²³ But the three states have not used this venue in any practical sense to operationalize democracy support initiatives on the ground. This ambivalence is reflected in the foreign policy agendas of individual states as well. To cite one example, India is a founding member of the CoD and helps fund the UN Democracy Fund,

yet New Delhi still tends to eschew high-level foreign policy partnerships built around democracy support.

Important shifts in U.S. foreign policy under Trump may encourage other democracies to rethink this ambivalence about coordinating to support democratic norms. The EU and democratic states worldwide are grappling with Trump's multiple assaults on rules-based cooperation and liberal norms, as seen (inter alia) in his withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and his battery of trade disputes with Washington's supposed allies. Paradoxically, a Trump-forced splintering of transatlantic harmony might ultimately motivate European governments to build other liberal alliances with non-Western democracies. The EU may be set to take some cautious steps in this direction. In 2018, the bloc agreed to new foreign policy strategies with both India and Japan that call for reinforced coordination on issues related to democracy and global human rights, although neither roots this aim in any new, upgraded, or concrete initiatives or commitments.²⁴

Another factor that merits mention is the more positive flipside of democracy's travails: the awakening of new forms of civic resistance and activism in both Western and non-Western states. It may be that civil society is best placed to act as a vanguard of democracy support policies in the future and bridge the divide between Western and non-Western democracies. Civil society has become strikingly more active in recent years in countries like Brazil, India, Indonesia, and South Africa. The vibrancy and density of such activism has not yet extended outward to focus on global democracy, but it has potential to do so. Many Western democracies count on a battery of nonstate bodies involved in international democracy support; a crucial consideration for the state of global democracy is whether similar networks of civil society organizations will begin to take shape in non-Western states.

Conclusion

The assumption that Western policies alone are relevant to protecting and promoting democracy globally is unduly one-sided. This judgment is categorically not meant to claim that non-Western powers' efforts to support democracy internationally are strong, consistent, unwaveringly principled, or effectively designed. Indeed, these initiatives are undoubtedly inconsistent and often limited. Yet debates over democracy support in these states are vibrant and meaningful enough to make it increasingly oversimplistic to frame the future of democracy as solely a matter of how well the West can retain its own power and prop up the existing version of liberal order. Despite conventional wisdom to the contrary, democracy's fate is not coterminous with the fate of the West.

This state of affairs has implications that go beyond democracy itself. The connection between the debates about democracy and about the global order is rarely made. An increasingly apparent

analytical challenge is that reflections on international democracy support and those on the global order tend to take place in isolation from each other. Analysts who are concerned with the broad parameters of the international system rarely immerse themselves in the details of democracy support strategies, and those who focus on the nitty-gritty of democracy promotion rarely extrapolate outward to broader trends related to the global order. The emergence of non-Western democracy support challenges this analytical separation; this issue naturally crosses the divide between democracy themes and international relations. This state of affairs invites analysts and policymakers to think in more nuanced ways about the future relationship between democracy and the international system.

It is important to recognize more fully how democracy dynamics are shifting. For one thing, many Western observers have largely ignored non-Western contributions to global democracy. Additionally, domestic strains within both Western and non-Western democracies may now start to draw commitments away from globally directed democracy support, while multilateral coordination on the democracy-related elements of the global order remain relatively weak as a counterbalance to such trends. When analysts plot the future international system, most of their concern gravitates toward the ascendant power of nondemocratic regimes. But just as significant are the ways that domestic backsliding in many democracies may negate Western and non-Western efforts to maintain the political norms of the liberal order. This serious predicament calls for a narrative that differs from the standard assumption that Western states are pushing for a democratic order while other powers merely seek to undermine them.

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