A League of THEIR OWN

Foreign-policy heavyweights on both the left and the right are calling for a new League of Democracies. One day, they say, it could replace the United Nations. But such a plan rests on the false assumption that democracies inherently work well together—or that anyone besides the United States thinks it's a good idea. | **By Thomas Carothers**

New ideas are rare in international politics. The actions of countries on the world stage often seem like endless replays of ancient laws on power and conflict that are impervious to fresh insights and initiatives. And nowhere is the lack of new thinking more acute than in the realm of international institutions, where a set of multilateral organizations established in the wake of World War II still dominates. Today, however, a big new idea for a new international institution has bubbled to the surface. It is the idea that the next U.S. president should seek to establish a "League of Democracies" (or "Concert of Democracies," as it is sometimes called). The league would be a free-standing organization separate from—and perhaps one day even replacing—the United Nations.

The idea is being trumpeted by a bipartisan collection of U.S. foreign-policy experts, which is surprising given the polarization of the political climate in advance of November's presidential election. Moderate Democrats set out the idea first. In 2006, scholars G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter featured it in the widely publicized final report of the Princeton Project on National Security. Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay developed it further in an article titled "Democracies of the World, Unite." Then, the Republicans joined the choir. Scholar Robert Kagan called for the establish-

Thomas Carothers is vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY THOMAS FUCHS FOR *FP*

ment of a league in response to what he warns is a growing authoritarian challenge from China and Russia. Neoconservative columnist Charles Krauthammer concurred. And Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain has advanced the idea as a linchpin of his foreign-policy platform, giving it prominence in national debates.

Thinking about what the league should actually do keeps broadening. Ikenberry and Slaughter envision a reliable means of gaining international approval for American interventions abroad. McCain and other conservatives have something more expansive in mind. According to McCain, a league would be a "global compact" that would "harness the vast influence of the more than 100 democratic nations around the world to advance our values and defend our shared interests." A league would "revive the democratic solidarity that united the West during the Cold War." In this view, a league would not only take responsibility for global peace and security but it would also bring pressure to bear on autocratic regimes, impose sanctions on Iran, relieve suffering in Darfur, and tackle crises such as HIV/AIDS and global warming.

The calls for the establishment of a League of Democracies are rooted in a useful recognition that the United States in recent years has operated too much on its own in the world. They proceed from a reasonable assertion that rebuilding the legitimacy of U.S. leadership will require a renewed commitment to international cooperation. No doubt much of the world is probably yearning for such a tack in U.S. foreign policy. Sadly, however, though a League of Democracies looks like a new idea, it is not. It embodies the same instincts that lie behind the made-to-order multilateralism that the world has grown so tired of under President George W. Bush. This includes a desire for American control over the group's membership, a lack of interest in the actual views of others, and an insistence on projecting U.S.-centric ideas onto countries that are increasingly less willing to follow America's lead. A League of Democracies, as its backers envision it, is not what the world has in mind when it dreams of a new era of international cooperation.

A PRIVATE CLUB

The notion of a League of Democracies will likely first fall victim to a familiar American preference: the desire to control an organization's membership to ensure a friendly crowd. The United States would undoubtedly seek to maintain a firm hand over decisions about what countries are invited to join the league. In truth, if most or all democracies were invited to join, and decided to accept, the league would end up with many members not inclined to support U.S. interests. Whereas in the 1990s most new democracies were generally sympathetic to the basic outlines of U.S. foreign policy, in recent years that has changed. In this decade, America's global posture has become more controversial and an increasing number of democratic governments are skeptical of the United States generally. For example, in the past several years, free and fair elections in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Lebanon, Nepal, Nicaragua, Palestine, and Pakistan have brought to power governments, or empowered important political actors, that are noticeably cool toward the United States. Faced with this reality, the United States would likely seek to limit membership to countries that supported key U.S. political and economic interests, keeping out

countries that are democratic but led by politicians who are prone to America-bashing, such as Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega or Ecuador under Rafael Correa. Yet, by accepting some democracies while barring others, Washington would taint the core idea of the league, reducing it from a group defined by a shared political principle to an association of America's favored friends.

Nor do calls for a League of Democracies appear to be born out of any genuine effort to canvass policymakers in other countries to find out if the idea interests them at all. The muted response coming from fellow democracies in reply to U.S. pronouncements about the need for a league is notable. When Kagan wanted to point to the support the league garners in Europe, the most he could muster was one conservative Danish politician. This lack of apparent consultation in the formulation of the idea helps explain its remarkable tone-deafness to the current international mood, particularly with regard to democracy and democracy promotion. Thanks in large part to President Bush's insistent characterization of the war in Iraq as the centerpiece of his "global freedom agenda," people the world over now see democracy promotion as a dishonest, dangerous cover for the projection of U.S. power and influence. Given this, trying to bridge the gap between the United States and the world by proposing yet another U.S-led, democracy-focused global initiative reflects an almost willful obliviousness to how such an idea would be perceived and received outside the United States.

In fact, the entire approach appears to be based on ideas drawn from the U.S. experience and then projected hopefully onto the world. Plans for a league rest on a wishful belief that democracies, by virtue of being democracies, share interests to such a degree that they will be able to act in unison on a wide range of global challenges. It is an attractive idea that is at least partially true. The common bond of democracy can contribute to countries getting along better and working more closely together. The effort to create a Common Foreign and Security Policy in Europe, for example, rests in part on the common democratic bond among European Union states. NATO's democratic standard for membership is an integral part of the alliance's shared international security outlook.

Yet the idea that democracies naturally align is only half right and risks being a dangerous oversimplification. The foreign policies of democracies, like those of all states, are not primarily determined by a country's domestic political orientation. Other factors are often more influential, including regional identity, religious orientation, ethnic makeup, economic profile, and historical legacies. Even in Europe, enough differences exist to make acting in unison on foreign-policy questions an elusive task. The same is true within NATO, where the United States has recently found itself opposed by some of the largest members on a core issue, whether to seek NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine.

The idea that democracies naturally align is only half right and risks being a dangerous oversimplification.

And when it comes to including such diverse democracies as Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Mongolia, and South Africa, the prospect that the United States would find in such a league a forum ready to toe the U.S. line on a host of security, economic, and political issues is dim. As former British ambassador to the United Nations David Hannay recently pointed out, the U.N. voting records of Brazil, India, and South Africa—among the most successful democracies in the developing world—reveal that "they are among the most anti-interventionist of all U.N. members and the most hesitant about authorizing the use of force." To take just one example, McCain believes strongly in the past, present, and future validity of U.S. military operations in Iraq. Would he be willing, as he says, to "respect the will" of the league concerning the future of that intervention, when many of the members would almost certainly dispute the validity of a continued U.S. presence in Iraq?

The idea that a country's foreign policy is primarily determined by its domestic political orientation is a projection of an idea about the United States that some Americans favor—that the U.S. role in the world is defined by the effort to spread democracy. This idea is itself in good part myth, a fact that further undercuts the rationale for a league. Promoting democracy is one goal of U.S. foreign policy dating back at least 100 years. But it has always been one

objective among many, often outweighed and negated by other competing interests. Even under President Bush, who appeared ready to push democracy in the world as never before, the United States has continued to follow a largely realist framework in which economic and security interests cause Washington to de-emphasize democracy in its relations with most other governments.

'KILL THE U.N.'

Perhaps the most dangerous thing about the concept of a League of Democracies is that it threatens to circumvent and even undermine real efforts at international cooperation. Implicit in the idea of a league is the notion that such an institution could fulfill some of the key functions of the United Nations, possibly even replacing it over time. In fact, the idea of a league was conceived in part out of frustration with the inability of the United States to obtain U.N. approval for the Iraq intervention, as well as concern that further interventions would bring the United States into deeper clashes at the international body. Attempting to push for meaningful U.N. reform, such as an expansion of the Security Council and a change in its decision-making rules, is apparently too time-consuming and uncertain an endeavor for many in the United States. Similarly, tailoring U.S. policy to fit existing international norms rather than tailoring international institutions to fit U.S. needs apparently just does not appeal.

The desire to use a league to get around the United Nations takes both gentle and less gentle forms. Ikenberry and Slaughter argue for a somewhat limited-use league that would focus on global peace and security, leaving the United Nations to continue its work in other areas such as education, development, and health. They envisage a harmonious coexistence between the league and the United Nations. Other proponents, such as McCain, seem to hope that the league could eventually sink the United Nations, taking over all its tasks—economic, security, political, and humanitarian. Krauthammer did not put too fine a point on it in a recent interview: "What I like about it, it's got a hidden agenda. It looks as if it's all about listening and joining with allies, all the kind of stuff you'd hear a John Kerry say, except that the idea

here, which McCain can't say, but I can, is to essentially kill the U.N."

People in many countries share American frustration with the United Nations' weak performance. They too are pessimistic about the prospects for meaningful U.N. reform. But few are likely to embrace an initiative whose implicit purpose is to weaken and eventually upend the United Nations, only to replace it with a less universal body. For a great many countries, the United Nations' resistance to the U.S. intervention in Iraq was a high-water mark in the institution's history, especially in view of the disastrous consequences of the intervention. It is precisely the United Nations' universality—which the league would undo—that is so highly valued in many countries, unwieldy though it may be.

Implicit in the idea of a league is the notion that such an institution could possibly replace the United Nations.

A League of Democracies is unlikely to come to pass, even if the next U.S. president is a strong proponent of the concept. The United States can go a certain distance by pushing others toward the idea, but the foot-dragging by fellow democracies is likely to be considerable. A massive effort was extended to get the little-known Community of Democracies started in 2000, and that was at a time when America's global reputation was strong. It was also in pursuit of a much less ambitious institution, one that only concerns itself with democracy promotion. Yet even it has failed to gain much momentum, producing eye-rolling and halfhearted commitments from allies in Europe and elsewhere.

New ideas are certainly needed in U.S. foreign policy. Not only is the U.S. position in the world badly hurting, but global challenges—whether climate change, food prices, energy, or global health—are only multiplying. A global yearning for fresh thinking from Washington is palpable. The calls for a League of Democracies are undoubtedly well intentioned, but they remain tethered to American preferences and habits that few want, or even appreciate. FP

Want to Know More?

Thomas Carothers argues that democracies rarely share enough common interests to work together effectively in **"Is a League of Democracies a Good Idea?"** (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2008).

The call for a league (or concert) of democracies can be found in the final report of the Princeton Project on National Security, codirected by G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, **"Forging a World of Liberty Under Law: U.S. National Security in the 21st Century"** (Princeton: The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, 2007). Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay seconded the notion in **"Democracies of the World, Unite"** (*The American Interest*, November/December 2006). Robert Kagan's support for the formation of a league can be found in **"The Case for a League of Democracies"** (*Financial Times*, May 13, 2008). Sen. John McCain endorsed the creation of a league in a speech before the Los Angeles World Affairs Council on March 26, 2008, available on his campaign Web site.

For a taste of overseas reaction to the concept of a league, see Shashi Tharoor's **"This Mini-League of Nations Would Cause Only Division"** (*The Guardian*, May 27, 2008), Ralf Beste's **"Obamamania Infects Germany"** (*Der Spiegel*, May 26, 2008), and Gideon Rachman's **"Why McCain's Big Idea Is a Bad Idea"** (*Financial Times*, May 5, 2008).

» For links to relevant Web sites, access to the *FP* Archive, and a comprehensive index of related FOREIGN POLICY articles, go to ForeignPolicy.com.