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How Middle-Power Democracies Can Help Renovate Global Democracy Support

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Summary

Democracy is on the defensive globally. Elected governments are struggling to stand up to emboldened authoritarian rivals. The coronavirus pandemic has increased democratic backsliding. Democracies are struggling to address these international challenges in the face of the pandemic and internal pressure from their own aggrieved citizens dissatisfied with progress on issues like economic inequality and racial injustice. Global leadership on democracy issues was absent from the United States while Donald Trump was president. While some U.S. democracy programming continued in the Trump years, U.S. presidential support for dictators overseas accompanied the destruction of democratic norms within the United States.

Many middle-power democracies hope that the administration of President Joe Biden will return the United States to its leadership role. The new administration certainly desires to restore democracy at home and fight for it abroad. Yet the past four years have left key parts of the diplomatic corps and bureaucracy hollowed out. A tightly split Congress may leave democracy support polarized and caught in political gridlock. The geopolitical challenge is too great even for a superpower to meet alone. And much work must occur domestically to undo the immense damage to the United States' reputation as a democracy and thus its ability to gain support from the domestic constituencies of other states.

Middle-power democracies—countries which regardless of their geopolitical weight have made democracy support a sustained component of their foreign policy—will be crucial to reimagining democracy support strategies and policies to better meet the moment. Some of these states have crafted new initiatives and wielded diplomatic tools to deepen their impact in recent years. However, these states have on the whole punched below their collective weight. This paper suggests that middle-power democracies can maximize their impact on global democracy in the following ways:

- **Enhancing solidarity:** when a country acts courageously in defense of democracy, it needs to know that others will stand alongside it.
- **Sharpening their focus:** middle-power democracies should target policy areas aligned with democratic values on issues both at the top of the geopolitical agenda and at the top-of-mind for citizens around the world—for example, economic recovery, injustice and discrimination, corruption, digital repression, and climate change.

- **Improving diplomatic cooperation:** pursuing flexible and focused multilateral partnerships allows for collaboration on key policy interests and amplifies middle-power actions.

The growing negative influence of China and Russia makes for an especially challenging landscape. But middle-power democracies can employ five strategies to counter authoritarian aims and interference while avoiding direct confrontation:

1. **Pursue** democracy-adjacent issues like anticorruption and technological regulation to avoid unnecessary ideological battles.
2. **Leverage** regional “swing state” status, where applicable, to force concessions on less controversial policy priorities.
3. **Build and use** Track II diplomatic and legislative channels to pursue more controversial policies that governments as a whole cannot.
4. **Channel** economic tools, investment, and aid to enhance democratic alliances.
5. **Revive** the narrative of democratic economic development to counter one of the most potent areas of authoritarian attraction.

Middle-power democracies have long been crucial actors in the international democracy assistance field. Now is their time to seize the moment and propel democracy support—and democracy itself—forward.

Introduction

The field of international democracy support faces serious strains and a pressing need for renovation. The global democratic recession of the past fifteen years has put democracy on the defensive almost everywhere. Numerous democratic governments face burgeoning citizen demands for better performance on issues like corruption, socioeconomic inclusion, and racial justice. China, Russia, and other authoritarian powers are exerting increased influence across borders, limiting or undercutting democracy in pursuit of their own economic and strategic interests. The conventional menu of pro-democracy policies and programs that established democracies continue to employ are often poorly suited to this new more contentious, unsettled international environment. The coronavirus pandemic has only amplified the uncertainties and the threats, with more than eighty countries experiencing democratic erosion as a direct result of government actions in response to the pandemic and many democracies struggling to handle the public health crisis effectively.

On top of all this, just at this time of pressing need, the United States during the Trump presidency retreated from its traditional position as the linchpin country for international democracy support, weakening international impetus and coordination. While the Biden administration is already reengaging on democracy issues, the United States will not be able to solve the many challenges at hand on its own. First, the United States' democratic credibility has been challenged to its core in the eyes of the world. Despite the change of presidents, the defects within its system have become so clear that they will significantly hamper uptake and demand for U.S. democracy support. Second, policy reversal will take time—hollowed out institutions cannot be regenerated instantaneously. And, third, U.S. power—whether economic, military, or political—is not as predominant as it was in earlier decades when the United States exerted global democratic leadership.

Other pro-democracy actors need to step forward as well. The role of middle-power democracies—democratic countries with at least some significant commitment to, experience with, and capacity for supporting democracy beyond their borders—will be critical in this regard. The tendency among numerous middle-power democracies to tread water on international democracy issues during the difficult Trump years was understandable. But it is now time for these countries to seize the moment and show that they are not giving up on the possibility of a more democratic twenty-first century. Rather than wait for the United States to reassert itself and then seek new partnerships with it, they should look for ways to innovate and lead, building on their own regional and thematic strengths. They will need to focus in more concerted and strategic ways on issues where they have comparative strengths, coordinate their leadership efforts more effectively, and exhibit greater solidarity among themselves.

Accumulated Challenges

The stagnant and often backsliding international democratic landscape of recent years has robbed the democracy support field of self-confidence and energy, underlining the painful question of whether international supporters of democracy have the necessary knowledge, willpower, and tools to make a difference. Moreover, the inescapable fact that many countries trying to support democracy beyond their borders are themselves experiencing significant democratic deficiencies has magnified the pervasive self-doubt and uncertainty over the field's future. In particular, four major challenges have come to a head in the past several years: fractious geopolitics, new demands on democracy, pandemic backsliding, and diminished U.S. leadership.

Fractious Geopolitics

The newly competitive geopolitical context is fundamentally more challenging for democracy support than the recent post-Cold War era. China's growing use of its increased political and economic power to shape a more China-friendly world butts up against international democracy support everywhere. The Chinese Communist Party's International Department has significantly expanded its training of politicians and political parties abroad on how a non-democratic country can make vast, rapid economic progress and on party-building methods.¹ This party-to-party assistance is modeled on, and serves as a direct challenge to, traditional Western democracy support. Its narrative is one that many states and ruling parties find compelling or useful for selling to their citizens. Meanwhile, China's mounting willingness and capacity to exact significant retribution for even relatively small perceived infractions of its sovereignty curtails the willingness of many countries to stand up to it on democracy and rights issues.

For many international democracy supporters, the China challenge reignites concerns reminiscent of Cold War-era tensions between geostrategic imperatives and democracy goals. Some European and Asian democracies, like Germany and Japan, find themselves torn between pushing back against Chinese policies that undermine democracy and their desire to keep their support for democracy and rights free of geopolitical baggage.

Russia lacks China's economic wherewithal and does not offer the world an attractive alternative developmental model, but it still presents serious headaches for democracy support. It is more willing than China to push its illiberal political agenda aggressively and to interfere in more explicit ways in democratic electoral processes abroad. Its disinformation efforts and its support for "fifth column"

politicians with illiberal agendas are forcing some democracies, particularly many European Union (EU) member states, to focus on protecting their own democratic processes rather than trying to help others. By exacerbating polarization and fostering perceptions of disorder in leading democracies, Russia is also reducing the soft power of the democratic ideal.

The heightened great-power rivalry and security challenges of recent years have fortified the tendency of democracies to prioritize good relations with strategically useful allies over supporting democracy. Under geopolitical stress, the United States and other democracies are generally more willing to partner with non-democratic countries or to overlook democratic setbacks so as to achieve geostrategic goals than they were in the less geopolitically fraught early post-Cold War period.

New Demands on Democracy

When the international democracy support community began to ramp up in the 1990s, it focused significantly on the institutional building blocks of the democratic process, especially free and fair elections, diverse political party systems, functioning parliaments, and independent civil society as manifest in advocacy-oriented nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Today, such an institutional focus often seems inadequate. Citizens in established and fledgling democracies are questioning the value of formal institutions that seem to produce—or at least be unable to reduce—inequality, social injustice, and corruption. A global surge in mass antigovernment protests in recent years, driven by these and related concerns, has hit many democracies hard.² Many international actors engaged in democracy support are behind the curve in moving away from old institution-building ways to find new ones to help address democracy's persistent failings.

One arena in which more fundamental challenges are upending prior assumptions of democracy support is that of civil society. First-generation democracy support interpreted civil society building primarily as helping build and back NGOs dedicated to public-interest advocacy and government monitoring. Today, restless citizens in many established and newer democracies question the value of such organizations, viewing many as elitist or even self-serving. Instead, more fluid, less formalized civic activity is mushrooming, whether through grassroots online movements, street-based and protest-oriented activism, or other forms. Such activity often questions the legitimacy of political parties and traditional ideas of democratic political representation. Technological change is facilitating this evolving scene, enabling rapid mobilization, new forms of association, and the decentralization of civic authority and initiative. The democracy support community is only just starting to adapt to this rapid pace of change in the civic sphere of many countries.

Political and social polarization has also risen in many democracies, driven by and enabling anti-democratic populists. In extreme cases, like Turkey, this has allowed democracy itself to die “by suicide,” in the words of Abraham Lincoln.³ Severe polarization threatens democracy because, as Milan Svobik has written, while extreme partisans voice approval for democracy, they may often care for favorable partisan outcomes more.⁴ In polarized electorates, this generates a willingness by hardened partisan actors to degrade democracy from within, often with significant or even majority support from the public. Here too, the democracy support community is behind the curve, without a well-developed set of operational principles and approaches for addressing rising polarization where it is occurring.

Pandemic Backsliding

The coronavirus pandemic has put further pressure on the overburdened field of democracy support. Many authoritarian or authoritarian-leaning governments have used the public health emergency as an excuse to enact new constraints on political and civic freedoms, causing a spike in the already worrisome global authoritarian trend.⁵ Some authoritarian powers, above all China, are trying to exploit the crisis to advance their narrative about the value of authoritarianism compared to democracy.

Caught up with the struggle to address the pandemic at home, some established democracies have less time and attention for democracy abroad. Others have been caught so flat-footed in their response that this has lessened the attractiveness of the system of democracy itself. Unable to set aside its polarization even to protect its citizens from death, the United States has particularly weakened its power of attraction. Meanwhile, many of the usual forms of democracy assistance and pro-democracy diplomacy are blocked by travel restrictions and domestic lockdowns. The unfolding global economic crisis has also constricted domestic and international resources for democracy support. Some foreign-aid funds have been shifted to near-term medical and poverty-related relief.

Diminished U.S. Leadership

Just when these multiple challenges have been coming to a head, underlining the need for renewed engagement and innovation in international democracy support, U.S. leadership has been at a low point. While in the decades prior to Trump’s presidency, U.S. leadership on democracy issues was at times inconsistent, ineffective, or unwelcome, it was nevertheless on the whole a foundation stone for the field. As has been extensively chronicled, Trump abandoned this position. His administration embraced dictators rather than democratic allies; repeatedly failed to mount high-level pro-democracy diplomacy at critical junctures, including in strategically salient states such as Belarus and Ethiopia; engaged ineffectively or not at all in vital multilateral forums and alliances with democratic

import, from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to the Open Government Partnership; and propagated antidemocratic ideas and practices at home, from undermining the rule of law to attacking independent media.⁶

As vice president and a senator, Biden has a long history of valuing democratic allies and alliances as well as of understanding the worth of a more democratic world. During the election campaign, he made clear his intention to return the United States to the table of international democracy support; and his administration is already moving forward in that regard.⁷ This will be a significant boost for the field, yet the United States will face constraints.

To start with, institutional renovation is not an overnight process. Even for a Congress with slim Democratic majorities in each chamber, the rebuilding of what William Burns described as “the demolition of U.S. diplomacy” under Trump will be slow and difficult for the Biden administration.⁸ In addition, the myriad forms of damage to U.S. democracy inflicted by an antidemocratic president, opportunistic national and state politicians, and politically motivated violence during the last four years have badly weakened the United States’ status as an international supporter and model of democracy. Trying to repair its status will absorb a significant share of energy and political capital that might otherwise be available to help support democracy abroad.

While the United States’ soft power has been profoundly damaged, its hard power is also not what it was when it took the lead in many areas of international democracy support in the first two decades after the end of the Cold War. U.S. military power has been chastened by the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Washington’s principal geostrategic rivals have gained considerable influence in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.⁹ China’s military growth and the rise of cheap weapons such as unmanned drones have created a more level playing field than the United States has faced in modern history.

Can Middle Powers Step Up?

Even though the United States is rededicating itself to the democracy field with the start of the Biden administration, the daunting international context requires a wider renovation of international democracy support. Germany has declared the need for a new “Marshall Plan” for democracy.¹⁰ Such a plan would entail action on many fronts and by many actors, including governments, multi-lateral organizations, nongovernmental democracy groups, private philanthropic actors, and media organizations. Crucial in this mix will be middle-power democracies because of their number, heft, and experience.

Defining Middle Powers

The term “middle-power democracy” is being used informally in this paper, rather than in the more formal, restrictive sense that focuses on a certain level of geostrategic presence and ability to wield military and economic might. This paper’s working definition of “middle powers” in the democracy realm encompasses democratic countries (other than the United States) that have made supporting democracy a part of their foreign policy in a sustained manner, committing a nontrivial amount of diplomatic capital and/or aid resources to the issue on an ongoing basis. Thus, for example, states like Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom are included as middle powers. While the EU is a *sui generis* political entity, its role as an aggregator and mobilizer of various middle-power democracies—as well as its sizable diplomatic and assistance efforts in the democracy domain—places it in this category as well.

Since the early 1990s, middle-power democracies have constituted a significant and often crucial part of international democracy support. They have engaged in extensive efforts to foster free and fair elections, strengthen political parties, nurture civil society development, back the rule of law, and develop independent media, among many other productive endeavors in new democracies all around the world. Their collective democracy-related assistance has outweighed that of the United States, and their diplomatic engagement on democracy issues has been extensive and often consequential. Their democracy support is less frequently attacked than that of the United States as instrumental cover for geopolitical goals (although the question nevertheless arises, especially with regard to former colonial powers like France and the United Kingdom). Middle-power democracies are located in multiple regions, have cooperative diplomatic relations with many countries, and maintain an active presence in many relevant multilateral organizations. Their leverage, in other words, is great.

Ten years ago there were hopes that some newer democracies, such as Brazil, India, South Africa, and Turkey, would join this set of countries as they began to assert themselves in various ways to support democracy in their regions and more widely.¹¹ But serious democratic slippage in many of these countries has chilled that hope. Nevertheless, non-Western democracies are crucial to the future of international democracy support because of their power within their regions and their visibility as models of democratic success or failure in the non-Western world. Even as they have suffered democratic erosion, these non-Western middle powers still often engage at least to some extent in supporting democracy beyond their borders, whether through diplomacy or aid programs. Countries that are slipping out of the democratic sphere cannot be considered middle-power democracies in the same

way as the set of countries listed previously. Yet they can also play a valuable role. Where governments, or parts of governments, are turning away from democratic values, other important elements in these states, whether parliaments, parties, the media, or civil society organizations, should be welcomed in adding their voice and assistance to the democracy agenda.

Middle-power democracies have many differences in their international engagement due to their unique histories, national interests, diplomatic styles, and areas of democratic interest and strength. The major Asian democracies, for example, with their geographic proximity to China, have greater security concerns and a stronger need for alignment with the United States than most other middle-power democracies. In addition, they have handled the pandemic better than much of the world, giving them a new self-confidence to challenge the long-standing preeminence of Western democracies on international democracy support.¹² Australia is an Asian power with a dependence on the Chinese market for its goods and services (including university education), but it is often aligned with U.S. and European diplomacy. Germany has a historically rooted caution regarding the deployment of hard power and interference in other states' domestic politics. Yet it also operates well-funded democratic governance programs through its overseas development assistance and funds large, active party foundations that engage significantly on democracy issues worldwide. All of this provides a glimpse of the enormous variety of demographic, cultural, diplomatic, and geopolitical interests that affect middle powers' democracy support strategies. Their actions to support global democracy involve each country individually determining its own direction. Alignment of such policies cannot be assumed; it must be consciously crafted.

Shared Constraints

Middle-power democracies share many constraints on their international democracy engagement. Very few of them (France and the United Kingdom are the two most important partial exceptions) have enough hard power and diplomatic weight to single-handedly influence the course of events in other countries. Most are aware that their actions alone will have little impact when it comes to diplomatic or economic sanctions against another state. So, while nearly all middle-power democracies have robust bilateral initiatives that can be quite agile and innovative, most tend to avoid direct confrontation, often believing (or rationalizing) that more aggressive approaches to fostering political change in other countries are counterproductive. Most of them also buttress their bilateral policies by putting significant effort into multilateral initiatives that can give them greater influence. The need to smooth the edges of their individual policies in order to coordinate means their actions are often slower, more cautious, and more diffuse than the policies of a great power such as the United States.

In addition, many middle-power democracies have faced various common difficulties in recent years that have hindered their ability to fill the obvious need for an increase in international democracy support.

Retaliatory pressure: Without the leadership and cover provided by the United States, middle-power democracies face greater risks in taking a hard stand on any international democracy issue that could lead to retaliation from China or Russia. The significant tariffs China has imposed on Australia for a variety of grievances related to Australia's democracy and human rights stance have made real the concerns that repercussions could be severe—and has further discouraged other countries from speaking or acting in ways that could rile Beijing.¹³ The risk of retaliation by major authoritarian powers has had a chilling effect on the willingness of many countries to stick their necks out on tough democracy issues. Acting collectively through the EU, European states might have the power to confront even the largest autocracies like China and Russia, but they have been reluctant to put at risk their commercial interests by giving greater priority to democracy support.

Middle-power democracies must also worry about being caught between the great powers. States such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea need Chinese trade for their economic security, while they are dependent on the U.S. military umbrella for their physical security. They are particularly wary of taking steps that would challenge the United States or signal a break with it in any significant way. At the same time, they must watch their actions regarding China. These realities, along with diplomatic and cultural factors, may have constrained them from acting on their own in the democracy sphere.

Domestic needs: Internal political and economic turmoil has preoccupied many countries lately, particularly in Europe. The large influx of new migrants in 2015 exponentially increased Europe's domestic focus and redirected international aid to migration-related issues.¹⁴ For the United Kingdom, Brexit has been all-consuming. The pandemic and the ensuing economic fallout have turned many countries inward, with political leaders feeling compelled to prioritize domestic over international needs. Of course, the inward turn is not complete—the EU, for example, has put forward new ideas and plans for supporting democracy and rights globally even as it has been buffeted by the pandemic and other pressures.¹⁵ But it is important to appreciate the internal constraints that many middle-power democracies face even as the need rises for their greater commitment on external democracy support.

Mixed interests: Like all countries, middle-power democracies have numerous and often mutually contradictory security and economic priorities. Pro-democracy aspirations must often compete with the need to tackle climate change, maintain energy supplies or trade relations with non-democratic states, fight terrorism, cooperate with non-Western governments on migrants and refugees, and other

interests. As great-power competition has intensified, middle-power democracies find themselves grappling with sharper geopolitical dilemmas. These can narrow the scope for democracy support, even if they also bolster the view that middle-power democracies need to make support for democracy more central to their geopolitical strategies.

Amplified Activity, Fuzzy Strategy

Reflecting these constraints, middle-power democracies did not on the whole move forthrightly or concertedly to fill the gap left when the United States pulled back on democracy support after Trump became president. To some degree, a paralyzing state of shock prevailed in many of their capitals when the White House began criticizing democratic allies, embracing authoritarians, and sending antidemocratic messages such as questioning the value of a free press.¹⁶ But, although there was quite a bit of trading water on international democracy policy among middle-power democracies, they have also taken some initiatives.

Sweden, for example, has undertaken a Drive for Democracy to magnify the already important place of democracy support in its foreign policy.¹⁷ The current government aims to make Sweden a leading international voice and force for democracy, particularly with regard to gender inclusion, youth engagement, and political and civil rights generally. It also seeks to enlist other countries around the globe in this mission. Canada has bolstered its support for international human rights, emphasizing the importance of greater sociopolitical inclusion.¹⁸ It has also partnered with the United Kingdom to spearhead a global media freedom initiative.¹⁹ As the UK government has started to look beyond Brexit, it has begun planning for a greater emphasis on fostering open societies and human rights globally. Australia has made a notable shift since 2017 to emphasizing shared democratic values in its diplomacy, a significant departure from its traditional pattern of prioritizing positive relations with authoritarian as well as democratic governments across Asia.²⁰ The shift reflects a sea change in concern about Chinese influence in Australian and Asian political life.

In addition to these efforts to promote values, some middle-power democracies have acted against democratic backsliding in nearby countries as well as those far outside their regions and usual spheres of influence. European powers, for example, have increasingly imposed EU-level sanctions on individuals guilty of human rights abuses in countries like Belarus, Iran, Myanmar, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe. After much delay, the EU adopted a global human rights sanctions regime last December.²¹ It has also withdrawn trade preferences from Cambodia and recently suspended budget support to Ethiopia, both on grounds of concerns over democracy.²² Some middle-power democracies have banded together in new ways through multilateral institutions to support democracy. South Korea has become a major funder of the United Nations Democracy Fund.²³ In 2017, Canada and other

countries of the Americas created the Lima Group in an attempt to help end the political impasse in Venezuela.²⁴ In 2019, in clear rebuke to the Trump administration, France and Germany launched the Alliance for Multilateralism, which aims to bring together partners to “express themselves and take action,” in the words of the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs.²⁵ The alliance is not expressly aimed at democracy support, but it has made statements on guaranteeing free, pluralistic, and high-quality journalism as well as on ensuring that technology governance has positive effects on democracy.

The Way Forward

These various new efforts have been valuable and speak to the continuing desire and capacity of middle-power democracies to enhance democracy globally—even though, like the United States, they balance this goal against other interests. Yet the whole has been less than the sum of its parts. An overarching strategy is missing—a harnessing of political, diplomatic, military, and economic tools to meet a strategic end. To move toward a more cohesive and consequential pro-democracy engagement that plays to their geopolitical strengths and minimizes their hard-power shortcomings, middle-power democracies need to demonstrate greater solidarity with each other, focus more explicitly on key issues, and coordinate more effectively.

Enhancing Solidarity

When a country acts courageously on behalf of democracy, it needs to know that other democracies will stand alongside it. At times, that may require rhetorical support and the cover of numbers. In other cases, such as when trade sanctions are levied or energy supplies are cut in response to a pro-democracy action, it may require concrete assistance. While a NATO-like collective defense agreement is unlikely, a more defined sense of ideological and tangible solidarity will be essential for middle powers to feel safe enough to stand up for democracy even in expectation of the inevitable blowback from authoritarian powers.

The clearer such principles of solidarity and concrete support can be made, the greater the potential deterrent effect they can have and the less they may be tested. A few instances of failed authoritarian attempts to isolate democratic countries in order to cow them into submission may be enough to deter future attempts. Conversely, if authoritarians find that simply the fear of retaliation causes democracies to step away from allies and principles, the more useful threats of retaliation will become to them.

Greater Focus

While a more congenial U.S. administration taking office will open up important new avenues for cooperating with the United States on democracy support, middle powers should not wait for the cooperation or assume that they can make a major difference on any specific issue only by working alongside the United States. They should individually and, when possible, together sharpen their strategic thinking and planning about their main priorities for democracy support and how they can lead on them.

Middle-power democracies generally prefer a soft and often indirect approach to supporting democracy. Rather than pursuing democracy as an ideological objective in and of itself, they like to link it with other values and goals perceived to be universal but less ideological, such as human rights, development, governance, and justice. Given this preference, they should be more purposeful and strategic in advancing democracy by emphasizing the need to connect democracy support to closely related issues that are at the top of citizens' concerns around the world.

Corruption: Anger over systemic corruption is one of the leading drivers of protest and political disruption globally.²⁶ Authoritarian regimes use corruption to enlist elite support. The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the ways corruption has inhibited responses to the health crisis and other governance needs. Democracy often correlates with reduced corruption; and some of the main anticorruption methods, such as greater accountability and transparency, also generally advance democracy. Yet fighting corruption provokes much less ideological debate and disagreement than explicit democracy support.

Economic recovery: The pandemic has devastated economies everywhere, sending immense numbers of new middle-class families back into poverty and vastly increasing inequality. Since Aristotle, observers have recognized that a vital middle class is necessary for democracy to function, and they have noted that significant inequality and concentrated economic power can undermine democratic representation. International actors dedicated to economic stabilization and recovery, such as the International Monetary Fund, often focus only weakly on the political dimension of the challenge. The democracy support community needs to make itself present in international efforts to craft an equitable economic recovery across and within countries.

Injustice and discrimination: Issues of injustice and discrimination are everywhere on the agenda, whether it be the mass violations of the rights of the Uighur in China, the tremendous injustices experienced by refugees in many places, anger over gender-related violence and discrimination in

multiple regions, or the eruption of concern in many countries during the past year to racial injustice. The democracy support community needs to step into these frays, showing how systemic thinking and action on political system change can contribute to rights progress.

Digital repression: Given the burgeoning use of digital technologies to degrade or disrupt democracy—from online disinformation to manipulate elections to the use of artificial intelligence and big-data methods to surveil and repress peaceful protesters—the democracy community needs to significantly upgrade its approach in this field. Areas of potential engagement include pushing back against China-led efforts to corrode free and open internet norms in multilateral forums, such as countering China’s “cyber sovereignty” agenda; establishing consensus around basic safeguards for emerging technologies, such as facial recognition; considering ways to limit the export of advanced surveillance and censorship tools to authoritarian regimes; and identifying new strategies to balance protecting online speech with staunching the proliferation of disinformation and computational propaganda. Situated between the technological behemoths of China and the United States, middle-power democracies have a crucial role to play in defining the terms of such engagement.

Climate change: Issues of democracy rarely arise in climate discussions, except in the context of scientists denigrating democracy’s slow, consensual requirements in favor of more authoritarian technocratic action.²⁷ Yet while few countries of any political stripe have achieved climate excellence, the authoritarian model has a particularly poor track record.²⁸ The democracy support community should make greater efforts to connect with climate-change actors to help find ways to make broader programs on accountability, transparency, and other democratic processes advance climate goals.²⁹

Global health issues: Analyzing recent pandemic responses will be crucial to preparing for future global health crises. Middle-power democracies have on average had a more successful response to the COVID-19 crisis than any other group of countries (though there has been great variation among them as they include some of the best and worst performers in the world).³⁰ Some of the top performers among these countries could initiate a high-level review commission, providing an important corrective to the narrative by China and some other authoritarian states that authoritarianism is a crucial advantage in dealing with such a challenge.

Focusing on policy areas such as these would inject new energy, ideas, and relevance into the somewhat stagnant democracy support toolkit of traditional institutional building blocks like parties and parliaments. It would help middle-power democracies recast democracy support from being a somewhat technocratic subfield balanced precariously between the development, governance, and post-conflict arenas into a domain of creative engagement on the top policy issues of the day, where democracy needs to be. Furthermore, connecting democracy support to these sorts of issues will gain buy-in from a wider range of countries than conventional democracy work.

These are not only areas rising to the top of the international agenda but also ones where the United States has been taking a back seat and where some middle-power democracies are already leading. The United Kingdom has taken a leadership role in the anticorruption sphere. Canada and Sweden have been on the cutting edge of issues relating to injustice and inclusion with their feminist foreign and development policies.³¹ Australia initiated a review of the origins and handling of the pandemic, while South Korea launched the United Nation's first group of friends on COVID-19 and global health security last May.³² In the digital domain, the European Commission offered a raft of policy proposals at the end of last year related to how internet companies may operate in Europe, new rules regarding political ads on social media and platform conduct around disinformation, and stricter limitations governing the sales and export of surveillance technology.³³ The EU's recent surveillance export controls are promising, and it has also launched efforts such as the Digital Services Act, the European Democracy Action Plan, and laws regulating artificial intelligence—all of which affect how technology and democratic rights will interact.³⁴

Addressing these adjacent issues provides an additional advantage. One major factor in whether democracy can revive globally will be whether democratic governments can show themselves to be capable of adequately addressing some of the biggest economic and social issues that preoccupy their citizens rather than expecting them to support democracy simply as a set of attractive political principles. In addition, citizens of middle-power democracies may more easily understand and accept why their post-pandemic, resource-constrained governments are fighting climate change, surveillance, and other areas that also affect their well-being rather than building the likes of courthouses in other countries.

When democracy policy goals are described this way, it also underscores how democracy support must connect foreign and domestic policy agendas. Democracy supporters must ensure that domestic policies do not undermine democratic goals abroad. For instance, the United Kingdom's efforts to address kleptocracy in other countries require equal attention to regulating London's financial and property markets so that they do not abet money laundering. Its work on media freedom abroad also necessitates a harder look at its domestic libel laws, which can be used to silence democratic activism in other countries. Middle-power democracies may need to explore building new institutional connective tissue and forging new links between democratic activists at home and abroad to connect domestic and foreign elements of policy change.³⁵

Middle powers do not need to have “fixed” their democratic deficits before they can engage in other countries—such problems are usually too deep or contentious for any speedy solution. Instead, simultaneous effort at home and abroad should be understood as a strength: it is a necessary step toward realizing a more cohesive, shared democracy agenda. Democracies seriously dealing with their

deficiencies can add humility and credibility to their attempts to deepen democracy globally. This can help middle-power democracies (and a chastened United States) think alongside the countries with which they are working on democracy issues rather than acting from an assumed position of all-knowing power.

Better Diplomatic Coordination

Although the Biden administration aims to exert more leadership on democracy issues abroad, middle-power democracies should not wait for the United States for the reasons mentioned above. A more multipolar world needs more leaders on democracy issues.

Middle-power democracies have generally been wary of any sort of formal “democracy alliance.” The weak track record of the Community of Democracies suggests the wisdom of that stance. While the new U.S. administration will likely organize the Summit for Democracy that Biden called for as part of his campaign platform, this will probably not aim to create an all-purpose democracy alliance. The democracy space will continue to need focused, flexible efforts of coordinated diplomacy initiated and led by middle-power democracies, especially in the adjacent policy areas listed above.

Middle-power democracies have had success leading flexible groupings in other arenas. The United Kingdom helped lead the establishment of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and gained valuable cooperation from enough countries to help it become the gold standard in extractive accountability.³⁶ The Inclusive Vaccines Alliance—a highly successful effort spearheaded by France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands—helped Europe gain access to COVID-19 vaccines and establish the principle of their distribution at a lower cost to developing countries.³⁷ Canada has initiated multiple efforts, from the Ottawa Group to support the World Trade Organization to the Muskoka Initiative on collaborative programming and aid for maternal and child health.³⁸

In the democracy sphere, there are several international groupings that already provide platforms for loose coordination. The Alliance for Multilateralism is, to date, a nascent, nebulous entity. Greater multilateralism is also not inherently pro-democracy (as China has shown by co-opting a variety of multilateral bodies such as the International Telecommunication Union and World Health Organization).³⁹ Yet, so far, the alliance has been clear in its push for a liberal rules-based order. While still in its early days, if political will is present it may evolve into the sort of loose, democratic convening space for less provocative methods of supporting various democracy objectives. The Commonwealth has also spoken of stepping up its pro-democracy action, particularly via cooperation among Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.⁴⁰ Last September, Sweden and seven other

democracies from around the world announced the establishment of the Friends in Defence of Democracy.⁴¹ Canada and the United Kingdom have put forth a common pro-democracy platform with Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, and Ukraine that could evolve into another overlapping group.⁴²

In particular adjacent policy areas, other coordinating mechanisms exist or could be created. For instance, the Aarhus Convention and the Escazu Agreement connect European and Latin American countries, respectively, to improve the environmental democracy sphere with greater access to information, citizen participation rights, and access to justice.⁴³ The Halifax International Security Forum convenes the security sectors of democracies and, while not intended as a venue for the development of formal initiatives, it can serve as a locale to coordinate positions through quiet sideline meetings, particularly in areas of security and defense.⁴⁴ The United Kingdom has floated the notion of a D10 (the G7 with a few other democracies) to address technological issues.⁴⁵ While some of these groupings are static rather than flexible, their attention to a single issue area gives them greater focus and the opportunity for enhanced coordination without tripping over other areas of disagreement.

Flexible, loose groupings of middle-power democracies may also be able to have greater effect by working together in preexisting international fora such as the United Nations, the international financial institutions, and regional bodies. While some of them carry historical, colonial, and geopolitical baggage, many can act in such multilateral forums with a greater assumption of goodwill and face less skepticism that their actions serve a geopolitical, strategic purpose than is the case with the United States. Just as the G77 previously helped smaller countries use bloc voting to advance their priorities, a grouping of democracies that is not led by the United States may have considerable weight. It would be especially important in this regard that middle-power democratic cooperation is not simply another label for deepening the considerable cooperation that already exists between Australia, Canada, and European states but rather a framework for bringing in a far wider range of partners from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Coherence and coordination could help such a bloc work against China, Russia, or other countries trying to co-opt multilateral institutions for nondemocratic purposes, without exacting too much pushback against any one country. In addition, these multilateral venues are often where decisions on adjacent issues such as human rights and technological regulation are made.

Loose, flexible groupings of countries need not always involve the executive branch of government. Legislators could come together, as Parliamentarians for Global Action did in 2019 when the group launched a democracy and human rights initiative to coordinate global legislative activity in response to the slipping position of democracy worldwide.⁴⁶ Transnational groups can work among themselves or with governments, as Freedom House is doing with Canada and the European Union to leverage

the Magnitsky sanctions regime to greatest effect. Media can also form such networks, as the Cartel Project has done to enable journalists from twenty-five countries to carry on the reporting of slain colleagues so that murder does not silence the free press.⁴⁷ Such nonexecutive leadership is particularly important to consider so that partners from non-European democracies can make their voices heard.

Opportunities for enhanced diplomatic cooperation between friends of democracy abound. It is essential that middle-power democracies take advantage of these groupings and take the initiative in filling communication gaps where they exist in order to build rhetorical and political solidarity.

Addressing Authoritarians

It is not possible to discuss a middle-power democracy support agenda without offering a productive approach to addressing the growing negative influence of China and Russia on democracy globally.⁴⁸

Under Trump, the United States took an increasingly confrontational approach to China, albeit one marked by some serious contradictions, such as Trump privately expressing to President Xi Jinping his approval of concentration camps for Uighurs.⁴⁹ The Trump administration took a much more forgiving approach to Russia, though it did maintain sanctions against Russia for its actions in Ukraine. Conversely, many middle-power democracies have worked domestically to build barriers to Russian influence but have been deeply concerned about being caught in the middle of great-power competition between the United States and China. The Biden administration may take a harder stance toward Russia and cooperate more with middle powers on Russia policies. But a strong bipartisan consensus about the threats posed by a rising China, as well as concern about the scale of its human rights abuses, will likely keep U.S. policy toward China relatively hawkish.

Middle-power democracies are more constrained than the United States in their dealings with major geostrategic challengers. They could do more to push back on Russian interference, but they would need to focus strategically on points of leverage, coordinate efforts, and support one another much more actively. With regard to China, most of them are trying to accommodate their diverse and often conflicting political and economic interests within a general framework of cooperation, knowing that they do not have the diplomatic, economic, and military weight to significantly constrain it.

Middle-power democracies could nonetheless use the following five tactics in coordination to have a greater affect on the global balance of ideological power, while avoiding direct confrontation and normative posturing.

- Middle-power democracies could work on adjacent issues such as those outlined above that allow for smaller and less threatening approaches to challenges posed by China and Russia. For instance, anticorruption and technology regulations may offer more acceptable, neutral platforms for addressing some of the Russian and Chinese threats to democracy.
- Some middle-power democracies could use their position as regional swing states in the larger geopolitical conflict to greater pro-democracy effect. In multipolar international orders, great powers compete to gain allies. That is likely to lead the United States to overlook democracy and human rights in order to gain the support of less democratic allies. But on the other side of the ledger, swing states such as Australia and Japan may be able to use China's desire to bring them closer to its sphere of influence to leverage greater concessions from it, particularly on adjacent issues that the Chinese regime does not view as essential to its hold on power. The solidarity of other democratic states would help these swing states extract as much from their negotiating positions as possible.
- Middle-power democracies wary of direct confrontation with geostrategic challengers could increase their use of legislative and Track II methods outside of executive channels. The scope of action for legislators, for example, is generally far greater than for executive branch agencies. The Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, launched last June to bring together legislators across democracies to address China issues, serves as a useful model.⁵⁰ Middle-power democracies could develop a strategy of supporting their legislatures, unions, business chambers, and pro-democracy civil society groups to speak and act against authoritarianism in ways that are independent from the inevitably more cautious diplomacy of the executive.
- They may also wish to create and fund bespoke institutions to support democracy that are separate from the government and can act independently, similar to those that exist in the United States, like the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its related party institutes. A few such institutions exist in Europe but they are very thinly funded, except for the German party foundations. Much more funding and effort could be put into building a new generation of such institutions—updated beyond the traditional party focus to reflect the kinds of adjacent issues discussed above. In 2019, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development of Canada's House of Commons issued a report calling for the creation of a NED-style democracy and human rights agency precisely for this reason. In the words of Thomas Axworthy, who presented to the committee on the subject, the goal of such an agency would be to serve as a “flexible instrument able to do things that an ambassador cannot.”⁵¹ Canada and other middle-power democracies could reaffirm their intention to lead in democracy support by advancing with or creating more such initiatives.

- Middle-power democracies can use economic tools like procurement, investment, and aid to at least constrain the efforts of China, Russia, and other authoritarian powers to pull countries into their orbits. They can be more strategic in pushing back against China's use of the Belt and Road Initiative to gain influence in different countries by marshaling their economic levers in a more concentrated fashion and more actively supporting the capacity of governments and NGOs in key target countries to monitor and question Chinese economic offers and deals. They could come together more purposefully in multilateral forums to counter the "cyber sovereignty" push by China and Russia—the idea that governments are entitled to set their own rules for governing the internet even if those policies run afoul of international human rights principles.
- Middle-power democracies could revive the democratic developmental narrative that has been maligned or missing in recent years. China's active promotion of its authoritarian economic success story has obscured the poor developmental record of most (non-oil rich) authoritarian countries. Without directly confronting China, Asian middle-power democracies could work jointly to amplify their own narrative of economic development through democratic methods.

Such efforts can be buttressed by the growing soft power of many middle-power democracies over the last year, particularly those that have displayed excellent governance during the coronavirus pandemic, such as Australia, Germany, New Zealand, South Korea, and Taiwan. Not all middle-power democracies have had such effective responses, and some nondemocratic countries like Thailand and Vietnam have also done well.⁵² But the middle-power democracies that have had success can play a valuable role in showing that while the United States and the United Kingdom have struggled to exhibit basic governance competence in the face of the coronavirus, this is not a shortcoming of democracies per se but rather of particular ones. They can also amplify the ways in which transparency and accountability have been critical to their effective response. They also have credibility to discuss the ways in which the lack of these attributes allowed the virus to spread at its outset and how problems of authoritarian corruption and concealment have led to additional problems, such as faulty protective personal equipment sourced from authoritarian countries. The Bali Democracy Forum is one venue that could not only help make the case that "Asian values" and democratic values can coexist but also explore the ways in which these two sets of values may have contributed to economic growth and to some of the most successful governance records in addressing the pandemic.

In all these different types of efforts for advancing democracy against geostrategic rivals, middle-power democracies will need to embrace greater solidarity among themselves so that an attack on one of them—or on their civil society groups or citizens—is perceived and addressed as an attack on all.

Conclusions

In the face of a long-term democratic recession and a pandemic-fueled spike in authoritarian practices, the international democracy support community needs renewed energy, ideas, and leadership. The United States, with the beginning of the Biden administration, is starting to reengage and rebuild its position in this field, but this will take time, especially given the serious problems with its own democracy and its relative loss of power over the past two decades. All parts of the larger pro-democracy field—governmental as well as nongovernmental, Western as well as non-Western—will need to be part of an attempted renovation of international support for democratic norms and practices.

Middle-power democracies have much to offer in this regard and must be a major part of the equation. Yet, despite their genuine commitment to democracy support and their dedication of significant diplomatic and assistance capacity to this endeavor, their efforts have been less than the sum of their parts. Their work could have a greater impact if they better coordinate their leadership on a set of focused, coherent priority areas where they have clear comparative strengths and if they buttress their actions with greater solidarity among themselves so that authoritarian countries find it harder to isolate and punish them for pro-democracy actions.

To achieve these ends, middle-power democracies should direct their activity toward issues that have risen to the top of the global agenda but are adjacent to traditional democracy support. These are less ideologically fraught, and many middle-power democracies are already engaged on them. Greater focus in each of these adjacent areas would be assisted by coordinated action in a variety of loose, flexible diplomatic groupings, which may also be more comfortable and effective than a static community of democratic countries. More venues for conversation and coordination among legislatures, transnational media, and democracy donors would enhance focus and innovation.

The benefits of robust, liberal democratic systems remain manifold. With authoritarianism on the march and long-standing democracies faltering, work is needed in every corner to ensure these benefits continue to be enjoyed around the world. Middle-power democracies have a crucial role to play in this generational challenge.

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