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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From the earliest days of his presidential campaign, Joe Biden has made the restoration and defense of democracy a centerpiece of his foreign policy strategy. From just as early, there's been a debate about the contours of that strategy, and efforts — by his advisors, outside voices, and allies — to interpret Biden's vision in competing directions. Some of sought to portray this as a remaking of democracy promotion in U.S. foreign policy; others to orient it towards the restoration of American democracy; and still others, to use it as a jumping-off point for rallying allies and partners against China's growing clout. Biden's own rhetoric leaves space for all these interpretations.

Every version of this strategy faces difficulties. The internal debate at times has left allies and others confused as to the president's intent. Real-world conditions — the variability of the democracies' internal conditions and of their relationships to China (and, increasingly, their confidence in the United States) — limit the space for the most expansive versions of this agenda: a genuine rallying of the free world against authoritarian powers. And even close democratic allies have been leery of too-public an effort to mobilize around democracy *per se*, either out of hesitation to air their own dirty laundry, or from an argument that a “club of democracies”-style approach to the China challenge risks elevating tensions and limiting coalitions.

Three targeted lines of effort seem most likely to reap policy rewards:

- Continuing to animate coalitions of the powerful democracies in a bid to constrain China's growing power and ambition, especially in Asia — building on the early successes around the Quadrilateral Security Forum and the Australia-U.K.-U.S. (AUKUS) submarine deal;
- An effort to mobilize a wider (but not expansive) set of democracies around the issue of political interference by authoritarian actors, and its connection to technology;
- An effort — so far only latent in the Biden administration's plans — to mobilize the middle power democracies around defense of core multilateral institutions and the values therein.

These focused efforts should be front of mind as the administration prepares for the Summit for Democracy, and continues its balancing efforts in Asia. The Summit for Democracy has usefully evolved from being the centerpiece of the democracy strategy to simply one plank; it seems most likely to contribute usefully if it can lend itself to mobilization around the multilateral system. But the acid test for the democracy strategy overall will lie in the other two domains: combating political interference and constraining China's mounting effort to bend the international order to its interests. And gaining ground on those two issues will require the administration to go farther than it has on walking back from a "Buy America" posture, to one more genuinely oriented around joint efforts by the U.S., core allies, and putative partners (like India, vitally) to remake global supply chains in critical areas — an "agile alliances" approach.

INTRODUCTION

The United States and the world's other leading democracies built the contemporary international order and have carried the lion's share of the burden of promoting and defending it. They've also profited handsomely from its existence and articulation, in economic, political, and security terms. The Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union was not waged by democracies alone, but they did form the core of America's most important alliances. As the Americans' main rival for influence, the Soviets operated outside the Western economic and security order (though inside the global institutional order). And through much of the post-Cold War period, the democracies had the high ground to themselves, able to shape the treaties, rules, and arrangements of international order in accordance with their interests, and largely in line with their model.

Now, things are more complex. Though the democracies still hold the preponderance of power in the international system, their hold on the character of the order is starting to erode. There are multiple causes, but the most important is that China — which exists inside the global economic and institutional order, but outside the Western-led security order — has started to marry its increased power to increased ambition, often aided by a weaker but muscular and risk-tolerant Russia. Put another way: there's a growing mismatch between the economic/institutional and security orders.

One option is to double down on a G-20 approach to the world, whereby the United States and its allies try to work with China, Russia, and other non-democracies, prioritizing shared global challenges — financial instability, infectious disease, climate change — over geopolitical tensions. This was a central part of the Obama administration's agenda, and did deliver some important outcomes on global public goods. What it did not do was forestall the deepening of geopolitical tensions. As the prospects for cooperative arrangements have eroded, a seemingly obvious alternative is for the democracies to work in a more concerted fashion — either as a caucus within existing arrangements, or in some form of new "alliance" — to defend their interests and the space for democracy in a rapidly changing international order.¹

As a presidential candidate, Joe Biden spoke to that idea, and made an early "Summit for Democracy" a centerpiece of his strategy to restore American leadership after the tribulations of the Donald Trump years.² In his first foreign policy speech as president, at the virtual Munich Security Conference, he went farther, stating that he was both reclaiming American leadership of the international order and calling on the other democracies to join forces with the United States in countering the mounting China challenge and the Russia threat.³ Despite some early pushback from European allies,

the Biden administration's early Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG) doubled down on this notion. Although the document leaves space for collaboration with non-democracies, its most emphatic statements assert a central role for a coalition of democracies. To wit:

"...we must join with likeminded allies and partners to revitalize democracy the world over. We will work alongside fellow democracies across the globe to deter and defend against aggression from hostile adversaries. We will stand with our allies and partners to combat new threats aimed at our democracies, ranging from cross-border aggression, cyberattacks, disinformation, and digital authoritarianism to infrastructure and energy coercion."

And, after highlighting both internal challenges and human rights, the document lays out an ambitious game plan for joint action by the leading democracies:

"We will join with like-minded democracies to develop and defend trusted critical supply chains and technology infrastructure, and to promote pandemic preparedness and clean energy. We will lead in promoting shared norms and forge new agreements on emerging technologies, space, cyber space, health and biological threats, climate and the environment, and human rights. And we will convene a global Summit for Democracy to ensure broad cooperation among allies and partners on the interests and values we hold most dear."⁴

In the period since the INSSG was issued, the Biden administration has made some gains and taken some losses. There has been important progress on lessening trade tensions between the U.S. and the most important bloc of democracies, the European Union, that were left over from the Trump period. There has been progress in forging technology and supply-chain cooperation — in U.S.-EU trade and technology talks,⁵ and with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad between Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S.⁶ And there's been the launch of the Australia-U.K.-U.S. (AUKUS) submarine deal — a significant accomplishment, which if successfully articulated will simultaneously bolster the military balance in Asia, increase technology cooperation among key Western allies, and enhance supply-chain resilience. At the same time, the administration lost ground internationally with the NATO allies through the *de minimus* consultations on the Afghanistan withdrawal and in wider standing through the perception of a botched withdrawal plan,⁷ leaving behind a dangerous situation, and in the fallout with France from AUKUS.⁸ What's more, despite passing the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill with some bipartisan support, the Biden administration has so far made only modest progress versus its ambition in its domestic agenda and has failed to push through much-needed voting rights reforms. All while accountability for the unconstitutional acts surrounding the attempted *autogolpe* of January 6, 2021 proceed at a glacial pace — and other aspects of elite accountability go wholly unaddressed.

Now, as the Biden teams advances the formation of coalitions for balancing China in Asia and also advances the Summit for Democracy, it faces a baseline question: will the democracies rally? And if so, which democracies, and to what ends? This essay



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asks whether the challenges faced by the world's leading democracies are sufficient similarly, or the gravitational pull of American leadership sufficiently strong, to motivate effective concerted action; or whether different threat exposure and perceptions may impede the collaboration Biden's team seeks. It concludes that three lines of targeted efforts are most likely to gain purchase:

- An effort focused on the powerful democracies, to balance against China's growing clout and influence, especially (but not exclusively) in Asia.
- An effort to mobilize a wider (but not expansive) set of democracies around the issue of political interference by authoritarian actors, and its connection to technology.
- An effort — so far only latent in the administration's plans — to mobilize the middle power democracies around defense of core multilateral institutions (and the values therein) as well as for the provision of global public goods.

WHICH DEMOCRACIES?

Will the democracies rally to Biden's cause? An initial conclusion is that the answer varies greatly by region, and by economic exposure to globalization. That is to say, the challenges faced by Taiwan are different than those faced by Germany; those by Germany different than those faced by Israel; those faced by Israel different than those faced by India; and so on. Different countries perspectives on the threats or challenges they face from the rising authoritarians depend on their geographical location, their exposure to globalized trade, the technological disposition of their economy/society, and the extent of their internal political divisions. Some governments do not feel that their democracy is under pressure from within whereas for others the internal challenge is acute (which ironically may make them less willing to join forces with Biden, if his strategy is to focus on showcasing democratic performance).

Asian democracies seem to be rallying in large part because the challenge from China is more proximate and there is a more shared perception of threat. Even here, though, there are important differences. Just take East Asia: all democracies in the region are concerned about China's growing power, but to varying degrees and they face very different threats. For Taiwan, China's military/political challenge is existential, all other challenges pale in comparison. For Japan, China's military challenge to its sovereignty is real, but limited; the greater challenge is China's growing political and economic influence.⁹ South Korea is divided on these issues, but many in Seoul see the greatest challenge as being squeezed by a mounting U.S.-China rivalry.¹⁰ Australia is experiencing the brunt of China's coercive measures and is weighing how to mitigate the long-term strategic risks of economic interaction with China. By comparison, Europe is divided, and more reluctant. Indeed, at worse, the United States risks offering its European allies a flawed bargain, one that increases their security risks and adds to their costs.

Rallying the democracies to perform better and to meet the China challenge is a logical and worthwhile goal. But doing it in a way that doesn't alienate as much as it rallies is a tough challenge.

Before looking more deeply at threat exposure and perception, it's important to establish which democracies Biden's administration is focused on. Early critics of candidate Biden's emphasis of democracies seemed to believe he was harkening back to the democracy promotion focus of the George W. Bush administration. This seems

a misperception. Although Biden's INSSG does refer to working with international institutions to revitalize democracy and protect human rights globally, the center of gravity in Biden's democracy agenda is elsewhere.

Democracies are often categorized by the degree to which their institutions are consolidated; but as the most advanced democracies in the world have watched their institutions fray, this has become less obvious to think about diplomatic clustering. Moreover, in thinking about the democracies' relationship to the international order, it is more logical to cluster states in terms of their relative power in the international system. Even this is complex; but for sake of brevity, we can cluster the democracies (with all due caveats) into three broad groups. First are those with very large economies, and the influence and power that that conveys — broadly, say, the members of the D-10 (the G-7 plus Australia, India, and South Korea),¹¹ several of them also members of NATO. Then there are the middle power democracies, of varying democratic quality, from Taiwan to Sweden to Chile to Nigeria (many of them members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD); they all have modestly-sized economies and well-articulated diplomatic capacity to protect their interests or advance multilateral frameworks but are not weighty players in the international order *per se*. Finally there are low or low-middle income democracies, from Timor-Leste to Tunisia to Bangladesh — countries more likely to be the subject of international efforts to shape the nature of their governance than actors in shaping the nature of the order.

Traditional American democracy promotion of the type associated with overseas assistance programs (and in the past two decades, with military interventions), concentrates on the third group: advancing governance reforms or regime change in the developing world, to widen the scope of democratic governance. An additional area of focus has been assisting newer democracies in the second category with sharing lessons and advanced institutional reforms, on issues like parliamentary oversight of the armed forces, and budget transparency. The status and quality of democracy in the powerful Western democracies was largely taken as given, as was the willingness of these democracies to join forces with the United States, often literally, to tackle a wide range of international security issues, from counterproliferation to counterterrorism to containing civil war. (Differences between the powerful Western democracies over the war in Iraq strained but did not ultimately erode this willingness.)

The Biden team's strategy reverses the prioritization. Beyond some brief mentions of working through international institutions on human rights and restoring U.S. engagement in the business of development, the reference to non-democracies or weak democracies in the less developed world is passing at best. The real emphasis lies in the *powerful* democracies — those that can meaningfully buttress U.S. defenses against China and Russia, either in the security or the technological sphere. The most important actors in this conception are the stronger, core NATO allies — the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Canada — and the powerful Asian democracies — allies Japan, South Korea, and Australia as well as India. (The strong focus on India holds despite an important degree of democratic backsliding in that country. The backsliding is a concern, and for U.S. grand strategy oriented to defense of democracy, a serious inconvenience; but the early emphasis of the Biden team on collaboration with India through the Quad mechanism makes it pretty clear that the strategic potential of India outweighs some degree of democratic erosion — especially since the United States itself has experienced an important degree of backsliding.)¹²

After this, there's a second focus for Biden's team — among the middle power democracies, there are a handful that play important roles (or potentially important roles) in the domain of communications and computational technologies, by dint of specific companies or manufacturing capacity.¹³ Thus, in pre-appointment writings by members of Biden's inaugural national security team on issues of coalitions or alliances of the “techno-democracies,” there's an emphasis on countries like the Sweden and Finland, given the past dominance of companies like Ericsson and Nokia and their potential to play a key role in developing alternatives to Chinese 5G technologies.¹⁴ As there is on Taiwan, by dint of its specific place in the global supply chain of semiconductor chips.¹⁵ Israel is a member of the OECD but is often mentioned in this context less because of its economic or strategic weight, or by dint of it being one of the few democracies (albeit strained) in broader region, but rather because it has several cutting-edge companies in the technology sector.¹⁶



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In short: the core of the Biden's grand strategy is not promotion of democracy in the developing world; it is *collective defense by the democracies* in the technological/industrial world. The fate of and prospects for the smaller, developing democracies is not neglected in Biden's administration; but it is an “also ran” in the strategy.

THE INTERNAL CHALLENGES TO THE DEMOCRACIES

Of course, the most powerful democracies are among those most weakened by populism, polarization, and internal division. So before turning to the question of democracies in international order, the Biden team understandably has linked the question to internal democratic reform. They have accepted the argument, made with increasing vigor over the last several years, that the threats faced by democracies start at home; that is, the major democracies have faced serious *internal challenges* of inequality, distrust of elites and of institutions, declining rule of law, loss of independent media, polarization, and populism.¹⁷ In some cases, this has led to a substantial erosion of freedoms, or of the liberal character of institutions (as in Hungary); in others, these challenges have gone far enough that there are serious questions as to whether the term democracy still validly applies to the countries' governance (as in Turkey).

Biden's team also tacitly acknowledge that these dynamics are tied into the articulation and spread of globalization in the post-Cold War period.¹⁸ The 1990s saw the end of superpower rivalry, the spread of globalization to the previously non-aligned world, and huge global economic growth. In GDP terms, the Western democracies profited handsomely from this growth; but in internal terms, they experienced a weakening of the working class as manufacturing relocated to Asia's middle-income economies — a phenomenon amplified by technological innovation.¹⁹ The global financial crisis and the ensuing eurozone crisis brought this dynamic to the fore, and sharpened the latent polarization; the OECD democracies have struggled with these dynamics since. Of the world's richest democracies, only Japan has broadly escaped the problems of populism

associated with globalization.²⁰ The political impact of inequality has been made worse by the simultaneous spread of low-barrier information technology, and the near fusion of that technology and of the media.²¹

Collectively, these dynamics have dulled the democracies impact on international order in several ways. They have drained resources, as the Western democracies have spent trillions of dollars recovering from economic and financial crises; they have drained political attention, as domestic discontents drive foreign policy and international order dynamics from the top tier of issues; and they have dented the reputation of democracy itself at a time when competition over models is heating up.

One part of the Biden team's response is to focus on "foreign policy for the middle class," and an early emphasis on "Buy America" orders for government procurement.²² Whether a semi-nationalist trade and procurement policy is the right response to the impact of globalization on political polarization is a topic for another essay. At least there is potentially a contradiction between claiming American leadership of the alliance and the multilateral system, on the one hand, and starting out by adopting a nationalist stance on procurement on the other. However, it is important to note that beyond the "Buy America" provisions in Biden's early executive orders, his emphasis on resilience in supply chains does not as yet take a purely nationalistic approach. Rather, the policy is theoretically open to an approach that links the democracies in a new, more resilient, less China-dependent version of globalization. (It is not purely nationalist, in that it reaches out to other countries; but depending on how it is crafted, it may well violate World Trade Organization rules.)

However, not all the democracies see things this way — at least, not from the perspective of the governments in question. Obviously, the Boris Johnson government in London does not see Brexit or British populism as a threat to democracy — it's the basis of its power. And their withdrawal from the EU, fraught and flawed though it was, is portrayed by the government as an unshackling from multilateral constraints — a view given a decided boost in spring 2021 by Britain's strong position in vaccine production and the EU's shambolic vaccine procurement strategy. President Emmanuel Macron's government does not see French democracy as being in crisis, even though it will face a tough challenge from the anti-Muslim right in upcoming elections.²³ And although Germany has had its bout of alt-right populism, it has largely fought that back with centrist politics and highly competent governance. And beyond Europe, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's India similarly obviously does not see populism as a threat; to his many critics, Modi *is* the threat to Indian democracy.²⁴ (And it's hard to miss American silence on India's clamp down and suppression of communication in Kashmir.)

So, among those very governments — the powerful democracies — that Biden's strategy relies on, the internal challenge to democracy is either not a factor or it's not viewed as a factor by the leaderships that will have to agree or not agree to join forces with the U.S. They are, however, increasingly responsive to U.S. efforts to forge balancing coalitions against China's military build-up.

Thus, whereas some in his team took an early view that the Summit for Democracy should be an occasion for the major democracies to join forces in part in a defense against internal threats, there seems to be very little basis of support for that view among the other leading democracies. Support for that dimension of the summit has run up against substantial push back within the national security apparatus of the Biden administration, but continues to have adherents in other quarters.²⁵ Biden's own

statements about the way he sees democracy fitting into international order can be read to support both arguments: he's clear-eyed about the need to address democratic performance; he's also stark in portraying a world of systematic competition between democracies and authoritarians.²⁶

At his best, he's clear that these are two sides of the same coin: increased the performance of the democracies is an important part — but only one part — of the struggle to limit the new influence of the authoritarian powers.²⁷ But this presentation has often been missing from the rollout of key elements of strategy, and the diplomatic communication to allies about the summit has failed to deliver the message. Most invited leaders will participate in the summit, simply because it's the U.S. president asking; but that does not mean that they are genuinely signed up for a focus on democratic delivery. Thus, Biden's overall strategy must rest on the view that the other major industrial democracies face serious (through differing) challenges to their economic vibrancy, to their political cohesion, or to the multilateral order — from China or Russia or both.

THE POLITICAL CHALLENGE FROM THE AUTHORITARIAN POWERS

The place where this threat perspective may have greatest purchase is in the domain of political interference. Several democracies, in different regions, have faced a political threat from authoritarian powers, who have used intelligence tools, disinformation strategies, and corruption to attempt to weaken the democracies from within.²⁸ This is well known and understood vis-à-vis Russian disinformation efforts in the U.K., European Union, and the United States but has arguably been most severe along Russia's borders and in the Balkans — Finland, Estonia, and Montenegro have been among those countries whose political elites and political systems have faced the most sustained, pernicious and frontal attacks by Russian intelligence and disinformation campaigns.²⁹

Russia's efforts have met with partial success, though as yet they have not succeeded in causing a democracy to dismember itself. And in some cases, they have created a backlash — as in the November 2020 elections in Moldova, when opposition candidate Maia Sandu won overwhelmingly in a run-off election after campaigning against corruption, unseating pro-Russian Igor Dodon, despite sustained Russian efforts to bolster Dodon's campaign.³⁰

China has also engaged in these disinformation efforts — in the United States to a modest degree, and in Asia to a substantial degree.³¹ Beijing, too, has faced setbacks in these efforts, as when China undertook expansive operations to tilt Taiwan's presidential 2020 election in their direction, causing instead a widespread backlash against China (especially while China was implementing a tough crackdown in Hong Kong), contributing to a decisive come-from-behind victory by the incumbent candidate.³² Beijing's disinformation and influence operations in Australia, combined with economic pressure tactics, including sanctions on Australian wine exports (over a diplomatic row), have caused a substantial reaction in that country, struggling to figure out how they can mitigate the risks of long-term economic exposure to China.³³ But it's also caused a blowback among U.S. elites, many of whom have close ties to strategic and commercial elites in Australia, America's most consistent fighting ally. Indeed, early on the Biden administration told the Chinese that there would be no economic normalization with the U.S. until China released Australia from its pressure campaign.³⁴ China has also

engaged in substantial cyber penetration of India, including in its critical energy grid, exacerbating long-standing tensions.³⁵ Many in Europe are now increasingly aware of China's disinformation efforts, given Beijing's propaganda and "wolf warrior" diplomacy during the pandemic, which attacked European governments for their inadequate responses and spread misinformation about the origins of the virus.³⁶



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And Beijing's political efforts in the EU have begun to draw fire, especially its use of a new diplomatic mechanism, the "16+1," by which it has sought to advance Chinese commercial and diplomatic interests in Central and Eastern Europe and drive a wedge in EU consensus and unity.³⁷ Compared to a mere five years ago, when it was hard to find an anti-China perspective in Berlin or Paris or London, Chinese behavior in Europe has begun to drive serious concerns among those capitals' national security elites — though not as yet a sustained popular shift in perspectives across all sector of government and industry.³⁸

Although Russia was a pioneer, and so far the greatest risk-taker, in this domain of political interference, the backlash against authoritarian disinformation has arguably been most consequential vis-à-vis China. This is partially because the notion of Russia as a serious partner in stability in the international system was never very widely or deeply held, whereas many in the West had high hopes that China's great interest in the stability of the international economic order would cause it to modulate its behavior when it come to the political/security dimensions of the system — overly optimistic hopes, as it turns out.³⁹ Thus, while Russian election interference and disinformation strategies during the Brexit campaign and the 2016 American election have reinforced anti-Russian views in many quarters, they did not fundamentally alter the trajectory of the relationship between Moscow and the West.

By contrast, it is reasonable to argue that China's aggressive disinformation and interference games in Australia, the United States, and the EU have altered the course of the relationships, helping to consolidate anti-China sentiment in several of the leading democracies. All this, amplified by international outrage at the brutal tactics China has used both against the Uyghur population internally, and in its crackdown on democratic dissidents in Hong Kong.⁴⁰ And, in spring 2021, Chinese sanctions against European Parliament officials, in a response to more targeted set of EU sanctions against Chinese officials involved in abuse and atrocities against the Uyghurs — even genocidal activities, according to both American and European sources — torpedoed European passage of a recently agreed EU-China trade and investment agreement (one negotiated against the incoming Biden administration's preferences.)⁴¹ Other countries have seen a shift in perception of China in response to specific moves, like the illegal detention of Canadians Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor; Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's former foreign policy advisor, Roland Paris, argues that that single act caused Canadians' views about China to have "hardened dramatically."⁴² Chinese hardball diplomacy has also begun to alienate foreign policy elites and the general public in target countries like Sweden and Norway — who also have to contend with bullying from Russia.⁴³

It should be stressed, however, that an effort to portray all this in systemic or global terms will likely fail. In the less developed democracies, China has not been particularly exercised to attempt to erode their governance models. It has used economic leverage to gain advantages, to be sure — but that is hardly outside the bounds of normal, even common, practice among donor countries. What’s more, the scale of Chinese economic investment in the developing world is such that many countries in the Global South see China as a critical part of their pathway to development, at a time when the West’s blend of loans and conditional pressures is less and less appealing.⁴⁴ The paucity of the U.S. and the EU’s response to the global consequences of COVID-19 has further weakened the standing of the West in the Global South.

But again: notwithstanding some of the rhetoric, the real core of Biden’s agenda is not this broad-strokes effort to bolster global democracy; it’s a more narrow focus on mounting a collective defense — against China, and of democracy itself — with the more powerful democracies.

THE MILITARY CHALLENGE FROM THE AUTHORITARIAN POWERS

If the challenge of political interference and influence from Russia and China is widespread among that group of countries, the potential military challenge is more targeted. Indeed, only a handful of democracies face direct military threats in the current dispensation. These range in severity.

The most acute military threat to a democracy from the authoritarian powers is to Taiwan, which faces a fundamental threat to its integrity, even its survival as a distinct polity, from China. The consensus of most in the diplomatic, intelligence, and analytical communities that track Chinese external action is that Xi Jinping fully intends to secure the consolidation of Taiwan back into the Chinese mainland — by political/diplomatic means if possible, by

force of arms if necessary.⁴⁵ This issue poses an acute challenge for the democracies as a whole, and for the United States — for Washington could find itself confronting a devil’s dilemma, between allowing China to absorb a democratic partner, at great cost to its grand strategy, or going to war with the world’s second largest power (and that, at a distance of 7,000 miles from America’s mainland borders and only 80 from China’s.)



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The Baltic and Nordic states also face a direct military threat, from Russia. That sentence has to be qualified: it is unlikely, if not inconceivable, that Russia would seek to seize mainland territory from the Nordic nations, or aim to seize full control of a Baltic state by force. But it is well within the realm of the possible that Russia would seek to seize *portions* of territory from some of its Baltic neighbors; it is already using extensive grey zone tactics to challenge Estonia;⁴⁶ has repeatedly used its air force and its submarine fleet to engage in provocative behavior in the Baltic Sea, including in Swedish and Danish territory, and has threatened Sweden or Finland if either joined NATO,⁴⁷ as some

political forces in both countries have sought to do. (All of this on top of its use of military force in Georgia, its annexation of Crimea, and its use of both direct and proxy military force in Ukraine.)⁴⁸

A rather different situation confronts Israel, which faces a direct military threat from Iranian-backed militias, especially Hezbollah, and potentially from Iran itself (if Iran more fully develops its nuclear capacity).⁴⁹ The scale of that threat can be debated, but its existence is clear. And while it is probably an exaggeration to say that Iran forms part of an authoritarian axis with Russia and China, as some have argued,⁵⁰ China's reliance on energy imports from the Persian Gulf has certainly given it reason to deepen ties with the only country in the region that is not a U.S. security partner. Still, it would be a stretch to say that Israel, consequently, sees a security challenge from China and Russia. Indeed, interviews with Israeli strategists suggest that it is only a very narrow slice of the Israeli security establishment that view China in the way that is now common in the U.S., as a strategic rival; for the major of the Israeli political and economic elite, China is simply a market, and a lucrative one at that.⁵¹ And the deepening of Israel-Russia ties over the last decade belies the notion that Israel sees a wider authoritarian challenge to its own democracy. (Israel of course is one of those (moderately) powerful democracies that has seen important erosion in its standard of democracy and the rule of law.)⁵²

By contrast, the large European democracies do not face a *direct* military challenge from any external authoritarian power. The major European democracies have responded to Russia's military moves in Georgia and Ukraine as threatening the concept of a "Europe whole and free," and imposed sanctions on Russia in response; but they have fallen well short of treating Moscow's moves as a direct military attack on European neighbors that would warrant a military response. Moreover, they face no direct military challenge from a distant China, either in the short or medium term. A political threat, an international order threat, yes; a direct military threat, no.

The situation of Japan and India fall between these poles. For Japan: China poses a potential sovereign challenge to the islands in the Japanese archipelago, especially in the disputed Senkakus. That is enough of a challenge to motivate Japanese re-investment in its surface navy and submarine fleets. But it is still a challenge of a very different type than that faced by Taiwan; and it is perhaps unsurprising that while Japan is beefing up its security defenses against China, other parts of Japanese society are openly pursuing *deeper* economic ties with China.⁵³ That being said, Japan has also taken the notable move of clarifying publicly that it would be prepared to respond in the case of a Chinese attack on Taiwan — an important shift in its public posture.⁵⁴

India and China have fought three wars in their history, and still face off along the disputed Himalayan boundary.⁵⁵ Although the scale of episodic clashes between their opposing forces is trivially small — sometimes with as few as a couple of dozens of soldiers, and simply with fists and sticks rather than weapons — the fact is that even this very limited territorial threat has served to sharply amplify Indian concerns about China's growing military power and its increased clout in Asia. China's cyber penetration of India has been at least as powerful in shaping Indian elite attitudes about their northern neighbor. The result: a steady shift in Indian orientation towards the U.S. and the EU, and its deep engagement with the Quad and the G-7/D-10.⁵⁶

Finally then, the United States. Of course, China does not pose a direct military threat to the continental territory of United States either, at least not at present. Many in the American strategic community do not see things that way, though; for China does potentially pose a direct military threat to America's Pacific possessions, including Guam.⁵⁷ (It is notable that Admiral Philip S. Davidson, then-commander of the Indo-Pacific Command, said earlier this year that defense of Guam was his number one priority.⁵⁸) But what is clear is that China increasingly challenges American military primacy in Asia and naval primacy in the western Pacific — two key pillars of American preeminence and leadership of the international order.

This is not the place to engage fully the debate about the merits/demerits of sustaining preeminence. But suffice it to say that those who have argued that the right approach to managing China's rise is to gracefully cede preeminence in Asian waters⁵⁹ have not convinced many beyond their immediate cohort. Their argument relies on several untested assumptions: that if the U.S. were to withdraw from sustaining preeminence in the western Pacific and East Asia that what would follow is a peaceable China within and beyond that zone; that that status could be reached without crisis and confrontation; that the wider costs to American grand strategy are either acceptable (or in some cases, a net gain); and that the overarching result would be a stable, peaceful multipolarity. None of these outcomes is theoretically impossible, but all rely on a very long list of things going right in a domain of policy where things often go wrong. So far, the American security establishment writ large seems to view China's growing military prowess as a serious and sustained threat to the United States; and that view clearly has a comfortable home in the Biden administration.⁶⁰ It's also manifestly the view of many of China's neighbors.

There are thus meaningful differences between the American security establishment and the most important policy/security voices in Europe when it comes to the perception of the challenge posed by the rising authoritarian powers. It was striking to see, at the February 2021 Munich Security Conference, that the leaders of two of America's closest allies used the occasion of their responses to Biden's inaugural foreign policy speech, to sketch out clear differences between their posture and Biden's call to arms.⁶¹ There's more comfort with the American worldview among some of the Asian democracies and semi-democracies.

There's an additional challenge here. If the primary concern of the United States is the military challenge from China, then it needs to assemble a coalition for deterrence and response that includes non-democracies like Vietnam, Thailand, and Singapore and semi-democracies like the Philippines; and this may, in turn, undermine or dilute other efforts to get the democracies to act together in consolidated ways. (Of course, during the Cold War we led and defended the free world while maintaining an active partnership with "our" preferred autocracies and dictators; hypocrisy has never been a hard barrier to effective American grand strategy.)

On the more positive side of the ledger, some key European leaders have begun to express a more skeptical stance on China, to be sure. Most notably, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, in a break from her former boss, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, recently described China as a "systemic rival."⁶² (The phrase was also used in the EU's 2019 strategy document, though leavened by a reference to the notion that China was both a rival and a partner, simultaneously.)⁶³ The Biden team is counting on von der Leyen being correct when she argues that no one wants China to be the one writing the next set of rules of international order.⁶⁴ Continual overreach

by the Chinese has helped cement her point of view; and in 2021 the EU revised its national security doctrine, sharpening its concern about China's challenge. Still, there's an important difference between the EU and the U.S.: in the U.S., the negative perception of China has spread well beyond strategic elites to much wider swathes of society; until very recently, only Silicon Valley and Wall Street were holdouts, and even in those two centers of gravity the perception has begun to shift.

CHINA'S GROWING ORDERING ROLE

The domain of international order writ large is where the China challenge is so far most pronounced, and may be where the democracies may be most able to forge common approaches. It is widely acknowledged that China has begun to elaborate its capacity to project influence in key international institutions and economic regimes. Well ahead of military parity, Beijing has gained major influence in global affairs — in the realm of global economics, trade, investment, infrastructure and development; in advanced information technology, including artificial intelligence (AI); in energy markets and climate change; and global public health.⁶⁵ It has advanced economic and diplomatic power to influence deliberation on those issues in every region of the world.

Not all of this influence is malign; and for low and lower-middle income democracies, China's expansive new investments in development, infrastructure spending, and resource acquisition has been a welcome boon. Ask Nigeria's leaders about the China "threat," and they will highlight the economic boon of Chinese investments and access to the Chinese markets.⁶⁶ Of course, a sub-set of developing countries have experienced the phenomenon of Chinese pressure accompanying Chinese investment flows. This has been most acute in that set of countries where China has sought to develop its network of ports — including Djibouti, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. American strategic elites routinely cite these examples of proof of the perfidy of China's global development role.⁶⁷ In the main, though, there is only modest evidence of China actively seeking to subvert democratic governance in the places where it invests.⁶⁸ What is clearly true however is that the scale of Chinese investment does dull the capacity of the Western democracies to export their model internationally, or to exercise influence in those countries.

Then there's the question of China's evident success in increasing its influence in international institutions, from the World Health Organization to the International Telecommunications Union to the World Bank to the United Nations. For example, it made a bid to wrest control of the internet away from the private (but heavily U.S.-influenced) Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) mechanism that to-date has been its principal "regulatory" forum; had it succeeded, the move would have given China much greater capacity to shape the future of the internet.



International organizations, long seen as domains of cooperation, have become new zones of competition, with a serious risk to the liberal character of those bodies, forged and defended by the West in the post-Cold War era.

In short, international organizations, long seen as domains of cooperation, have become new zones of competition, with a serious risk to the liberal character of those bodies, forged and defended by the West in the post-Cold War era.⁶⁹ In the INSSG, the Biden administration takes up that argument: "It is also critical that these institutions continue to reflect the universal

values, aspirations, and norms that have underpinned the UN system since its founding 75 years ago, rather than an authoritarian agenda. In a world of deepening rivalry, we will not cede this vital terrain.”⁷⁰

It’s far from obvious that the European and Asian democracies all agree. America’s hand in this “deepening rivalry” has been weakened, to be sure, by the recurrent anti-multilateralism of U.S. administrations, which have left many putative partners skeptical about the degree of sustained American commitment to any of the major multilateral regimes. A senior European diplomat responded to the notion of approaching the multilateral domain as a zone of competition by arguing that if that’s how the United States approached multilateralism, Washington would lose European support. What’s more, all of our partners have experienced the reality that America, even under Democratic presidents, picks and chooses when its foreign policy or its foreign economic policy aligns with the rules and treaties of international order. As my one of my Brookings colleagues recently remarked, “The problem with the notion that our policy is to defend a ‘rules-based order,’ is, we’re the ones that most often breaks the rules.”⁷¹ And several Asian leaders, including those of close U.S. security partners like Singapore as well as the region’s democracies, have expressed serious concern at being “forced to choose” between the United States and China in a changing order.⁷² They view multilateralism in precisely the opposite way — as a mechanism to forge compromises between the top powers, thereby avoiding being forced into hard choices.

The United States has consistently under-invested in its diplomatic capacity within the multilateral system — the wake-up call of China’s campaign for sustained influence within global institutions came only just in time to rally Washington to join forces with Europe to block what would have been a truly absurd development, namely a Chinese-run candidate taking over the World Intellectual Property Rights Organization (WIPO).⁷³ But too late to stop China from diluting the pandemic health protection mechanisms of the WHO — at great, and now apparent, cost.⁷⁴ And deep differences between Europeans, Asians, and Americans on the baselines of multilateralism are likely to lead to very different perceptions of the new challenge of deep Chinese influence in these institutions.

The gaps between the United States and its European and Asian allies over China’s role in the multilateral order is most evident in the trade domain. While Democratic strategists have been arguing for increasing the coherence of democracies within the World Trade Organization (WTO), for example, as a way of countering Chinese influences,⁷⁵ the other democracies have gone a different way. Even as many democratic allies held their breath waiting and hoping for a Biden victory, and well aware of the anti-China turn in his national security team, several of them inked major new trade and investment deals with China. Japan and China signed an agreement in 2019 agreeing on joint investments on Asian infrastructure projects, including through Japanese co-investment with the much-reviled Belt and Road Initiative; Japan and Australia both signed on to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), China’s answer to the Trans-Pacific Partnership. As they took office, the Biden team was left to tweet carefully that they hoped that in future their allies would consult with Washington first before setting a direction on China policy.⁷⁶ And similarly, there’s a stark difference between the U.S. and its allies over energy trade with Russia; the issue of NordStream 2 caused serious complications for the Biden administration with Congress, though a series of creative workarounds have so far avoided sanctions on Germany — which would be a highly ironic and unfortunate outcome for an administration committed to reversing the anti-alliance moves of the previous one.

COVID-19 AND CLIMATE: DEMOCRACIES AND GLOBAL PUBLIC BADS

Cutting further against trans-Atlantic and wider democratic cooperation is the reality that while the Biden team was forming its thinking and strategy, all the democracies, and everyone else, were coping with COVID-19, the first true pandemic in a century. It highlighted their increasing vulnerability to the downsides of globalization — so called “global public bads”: the adverse effects of climate change, the spread of infectious and even pandemic disease, and financial instability.⁷⁷ But it also highlighted a distressing problem — that the United States, the world’s most powerful democracy, by any measure, has been an unreliable partner in tackling these issues, at best. Twice now, under Presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump, the United States has walked away from the primary international regime through which the world has sought to tackle climate change. And under President Trump, in an act of near-suicidal stupidity, the United States dissociated itself from and weakened collective international efforts through the WHO and COVAX to tackle the coronavirus pandemic.⁷⁸ (The Biden administration has since reversed those steps.) That the closed regime in China was a source of misinformation and obstruction in the early days of the pandemic was appalling, but less surprising for many countries than to find the White House becoming an obstacle to their efforts to protect themselves from the virus. Thus, while China’s early lack of transparency over the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan was blamed by the Trump administration for causing the pandemic, most of America’s democratic allies viewed the U.S. response to COVID-19 as at least equally destructive to an effective response to the pandemic.⁷⁹ (Of course, even EU members found it hard to work with each other under the intense pressures of the pandemic.)

Even as President Biden and his team made progress on vaccinations and other COVID-19 mitigation measures in the United States, their international effort, and that of the G-7, has continued to disappoint. Indeed, it’s hard to find to understand why the administration has not rallied to Biden’s early call to have America become the world’s “arsenal of vaccines”⁸⁰ — a step that would reap huge rewards in American public diplomacy, save countless hundreds of thousands of lives, and diminish the risk of new variants that would cause renewed disruption, deaths, and vast economic damage once again to the United States and the rest of the world.

The damage to American leadership on global issues has been substantial. Traditional American leadership in global public health, through the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), was disastrously weakened by the Trump White House’s effort to politicize CDC guidance and the mixed, confused, and non-scientific messages from the president. The middle powers, unhappy with China and distressed by the U.S., went their own way, banding together in various informal coalitions to advance international cooperation on the pandemic without bothering with the United States.⁸¹ In what was easily the gravest crisis since the end of the Cold War, the United States was an obstacle not an ally to the other democracies. The apparent likelihood of a second Trump presidential bid in 2024,



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and polls showing that he could win, cause America's allies to worry that this was a not a one-off episode. As the leading democracies assess their situation in a post-pandemic world, the unreliability of the United States in a moment of acute crisis will stand as a clear and continuing danger.

Thus, America's recent turn to what my Brookings colleague Robert Kagan has called "hyper unilateralism,"⁸² and its recurrent unreliability on global issues like climate change and now pandemic disease — issues that publics in many democracies see as the gravest challenges they face — may cause some democracies, especially in Europe, to devote more of their resources to self-reliance than to support to the American-led order.⁸³ That is true even in what has been the final bulwark of the democracies' power in the international system, NATO; the notion of an independent European security architecture has gained substantial ground in the last several years.⁸⁴

A FAVORABLE "INTERNATIONAL TECHNOLOGICAL ORDER"?

Despite all this, the Biden administration — or, rather, several important voices within the administration — appear set on pursuing what the recent National Commission on Artificial Intelligence refers to as a "favorable international technological order" — that is, by their depiction, an international order in which the United States can retain technological preeminence, cooperate with democratic allies, forge multilateral arrangements that support its advantages, and engage in dialogue with China to reduce tensions.⁸⁵

There are several extant ideas about how to pull the "techno-democracies" into closer collaboration. An early version of the argument was advanced by the U.K. government under Boris Johnson, which announced in 2020 that it would use its chairmanship of the G-7 in 2021 to convene a wider grouping of countries, to include South Korea, India, and Australia, to work on building alternatives to 5G technologies.⁸⁶ The announcement built on prior track 1.5 engagements of the "D-10" of leading democracies, a mechanism originally advanced by David Gordon and Ash Jain.⁸⁷ In the subsequent months, the U.K. walked back from this announcement somewhat, while confirming that these three countries were being invited to attend the G-7 summit as guests. (South Africa was added at the last minute.) The U.K. had encountered pushback on the notion of expanding the G7 to incorporate these three countries, both internally in different U.K. ministries, and among other members of the G-7, notably Japan.

Part of the challenge was that while the original U.K. announcement tied the invitations to technology debates, the wider discussion around expanding the G-7 tied it to the question of the democratic character of new invitees (a D-10, a distinct from a G-10).⁸⁸ In these terms, the erosion of democracy in India was a concern for the U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, as was the question of the precise grouping — measured by economic scale, after all, Brazil would be an invitee before Australia (and while Brazil's democracy has been challenged by the Jair Bolsonaro government, not more so than India's by Modi's.) A variant that has been floated by Jared Cohen and Richard Fontaine is for the creation of a T-12 — a Technology 12.⁸⁹ This is roughly the same idea as the D-10, but with a different mix of countries that play important roles in the technology space but would not otherwise qualify for a G-group based on economic size, including Sweden, Finland, and Israel.

These proposals have attracted almost equal measures of enthusiasm and conservatism, as well as some thoughtful critiques — most importantly over whether, in an international environment in which the West no longer holds easy sway, it is legitimate or wise to forge multilateral arrangements that have no representation from Africa, Latin America, or the Arab world.⁹⁰ (In fairness, in Cohen and Fontaine’s original version of the T-12 argument, they do call for it to grow over the next several years to a T-20 that would incorporate states from these regions.) It’s a view that make take on even more salience as the U.S. encounters the depth of anger and resentment now evident in a developing world that has watched the West expend vast resources on vaccine development and economic recovery while many countries in the developing world face years of vaccine isolation, economic rollback, and a debt crisis. Moves like the Quad’s agreement to finance a billion vaccine doses in India may help to dull that resentment, but the clear sense that the move was an effort to counter China did little to reassure those who thought that global public health should be insulated from geopolitical tensions (as it was even during the height of the Cold War).⁹¹

The most fluid set of arguments that have been proposed were presented by Georgetown University’s Center for Security and Emerging Technology (CSET), in their report on “agile alliances.”⁹² The CSET report takes a “variable geometry” approach, highlighting the countries and multilateral fora that are germane to a set of specific technologies and technology-management goals, from investment screening, to managing hardware chokepoints, to data-sharing, research, and norm-setting. The list of countries that would end up participating in one or another mechanism envisaged by this report incorporate all the countries listed under the D-10 or T-12 but also capture important regional or niche players like Singapore, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Taiwan, as well as a wider range of multilateral or multinational institutions/arrangements, from the Asian Development Bank to the Five Eyes.

Building on these ideas, the final report of the National Commission on Artificial Intelligence — which received a favorable early reception from Biden’s national security adviser, Jake Sullivan⁹³ — is both vaguer and more specific in its proposals. Vaguer, in that it calls for the U.S. to begin the work of forging an “emerging technology coalition,” without doing much to specify who that would incorporate or through what kind of formal/informal arrangement. More specific, in that it also proposes the establishment of a Multilateral AI Research Initiative, kick-started by the National Science Foundation, located in the United States, and oriented towards supporting multilateral research in AI innovation (but presumably open only to like-minded countries).⁹⁴

These, and similar ideas, leave the Biden administration with a menu of options but some key questions to be answered. A conceptually easy but diplomatically thorny question arises about the merits or demerits of fixed or variable groups. A harder question concerns the partial disjuncture between the countries that would be logical to bring into a technology grouping and those that the administration will seeking to bring into tighter security partnership vis-à-vis China; how will a country like Vietnam react to being asked to deepen security ties with the U.S. vis-à-vis China, but being excluded from a key technology/security club? Should the technology grouping include only full democracies? Or is the participation of non-democracies that are key U.S. security partners like Singapore necessary?

Perhaps most difficult of all: what incentives will the U.S. provide for major companies to join this effort? The diplomatic work of bring various groupings of countries together is one thing; generating sustained participation of the private sector firms in these countries is another challenge altogether. But this approach will meet a different challenge, namely that in several major democracies, while strategic elites have begun to move towards a more anti-China posture, the wider society, including business and technology elites, have not.⁹⁵ If the technologies that the United States wants to harness were in the hands of governments, this would not be a problem. But they are not; they lie, for the most part, in the private sector. And just as the United States will face challenges in re-orienting its own technology giants towards a different posture on China and Russia, so too will the German, Swedish, Finnish, Israeli, Indian, and even Japanese governments.



Just as the United States will face challenges in re-orienting its own technology giants towards a different posture on China and Russia, so too will the German, Swedish, Finnish, Israeli, Indian, and even Japanese governments.

The history of U.S. order-building both during the Cold War and the post-Cold War period suggests that the United States will have to put serious incentives on the table — or use such leverage at it has, and not just rely on shared security fears — if other countries, and the companies of other countries, are going to play ball. A recent survey of senior executives in the technology sector adds to this concern: while many recognize the probability that the U.S. and China will start to pull apart in the technology space — to “decouple” — their intent from a corporate perspective is to keep investments in both zones, to continue to work in both the Chinese and the American markets.⁹⁶ Unless the United States adopts legislative restrictions against them doing so, the U.S. will be fighting against the prevailing tide in the corporate world.

There’s also a concern, here, that U.S. policy could end up in violation of WTO treaty commitments, and be subject to legal action by other WTO members. But there’s also an important option here, that could help the administration square these circles. In President Biden’s directives to investigate supply-chain resilience — including in the technology sector — the proposed solution set includes working with allies. Within the WTO, there’s a Government Procurement Arrangement — which just so happens to be encompass most of the key technological democracies (including Taiwan). If the administration lands on using the existing WTO government procurement mechanism, it can stay within WTO rules and create incentives for allies.⁹⁷

The AUKUS agreement on submarines and technology is an important example of another approach: giving a key ally access to closely-guarded U.S. technology, and building cooperation around that agreement. While the specific technology in question there — nuclear propulsion for submarines — could not be shared widely, the U.S. could do more to build incentives for cooperation around access to collaboration with leading AI, quantum computing, and cyber assets of the U.S. government (and, ideally, private sector.)

CONCLUSIONS: WHERE SHOULD THE STRATEGY GO FROM HERE?

Taking all this together, is there enough of a shared sense of threat from China and Russia, or enough tail wind from American leadership, to cause the democracies to join forces and rally to Biden's call?

Traditionally, countries will join forces to combat or curtail an adversary under one of two conditions: they share a perception (or reality) of threat from that adversary; or one of the countries is sufficiently reliant on the security provision from the other that it will go along with the more dominant countries' policy even against its own perceived economic interest. A central challenge for Biden will be that the democracies that the United States must mobilize, if it wants to see more coherent democratic action in defense of the international order, do not fully agree on the nature, severity, or sequence of the threats. As China's power grows, and as it adopts an increasingly assertive posture in international affairs, this dynamic may change — indeed, among national security elites in capitals like Berlin and Delhi, it has already begun to change. But because many democratic capitals do not see China as an acute security threat and continue to have economic interests in ties with China, the U.S. risks being in the difficult position of offering its democratic allies a rather unwelcome bargain: join forces with us in constraining China (thereby *increasing* your security risk, in the short term); and to do so, diminish your economic and technology ties to China (thereby taking an economic cost.) It's an offer that compares very unfavorably to the American offer to its allies during the Cold War, or to American leverage in the post-Cold War moment. (And this flawed offer will be all the more unpalatable if the United States continues to be an unreliable partner in managing the mounting disruptions from climate change and pandemic disease.)

The U.S. could add sweeteners in this effort, if it eschews the “Buy America” approach and goes the other way, requiring that U.S. companies bidding for government contracts in the technology space build in a provision for collaboration with partner firms in selected, democratic countries. Here, however, the U.S. could fall afoul of the WTO and of its own general support for an open, rules-based trade system. The Biden administration may face a serious contradiction between its desire to be postured a pro-multilateralism, and the need to prioritize its collaborations to compete with China. (Given the poor performance of the WTO of late, some in the domestic U.S. debate shrug off any consequences for the body — but erosion of core WTO agreements is a very dangerous path to follow.)

Even where the powerful democracies share a sense of the authoritarian challenge, they diverge on some of the responses. The growing American consensus, amplified by China's role in the COVID-19 outbreak, is to move towards greater resilience in its supply chains, delinking from China in some critical technologies and sensitive supplies. By contrast, many private sector actors in Europe and Asia have the exact opposite view; that deepening economic integration with China helps to maintain a degree of ballast in the relationship, even as strategic tensions mount. And in Europe and Israel, China is still viewed by many elites both as an attractive market and even potentially as a bulwark against an erratic America.

Only in the area of political interference and diplomatic pressure tactics is there a more widespread experience and exposure among the democracies. Tying this issue to China's growing technological prowess (and Russia's "sharp" tactics) may provide the Biden administration's best hope for rallying wide support to its strategy, at least among the more powerful democracies.⁹⁸



The administration faces a quandary: a too-strong emphasis on democratic consolidation is likely to actually leave some of the most powerful partners out of the picture, weakening efforts to limit China's widening influence.

The alternative is to put far greater emphasis on the Asian democracies, and orient the effort around an effort to constrain China — whether that is a stated or an implicit goal. That approach seems likely to succeed in its narrow terms, i.e. forging a U.S.-led coalition. Whether it can succeed in its wider terms, i.e. limiting Chinese influence, without deep involvement by the Europeans, is more in doubt. Hence, the administration faces a quandary: a too-strong emphasis on democratic consolidation is likely to actually leave some of the most powerful partners out of the picture, weakening efforts to limit China's widening influence.

The more subtle approach advocated by some within the Biden administration, of forging quiet, technology specific coalitions to increase Western resilience in the technological sphere and in sensitive global supply chains — the "agile alliances" approach — may elide some of the obstacles outlined above. Linking political disinformation challenges to technology resilience can provide a pathway for the administration to create incentives for collaboration as well, if — and it's an important if — Washington eschews a narrow "Buy America" approach to the technology space.

Finally, the Biden administration would do itself a major favor if it moves up the priority list the issue of democratic cooperation within key multilateral institutions that tackle global issues — from the WTO to the WHO to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to the U.N. Security Council. An important outcome of an effort to rally the democracies could be processes that lead to greater alignment of funding and policy of the major democracies at these key bodies. These international organizations get little attention in the U.S. strategic debate, until all of a sudden we discover that the weaknesses of one of them rebounds hugely to our cost — as in the early lapses in the performance of the WHO in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Working with other leading democracies to drive serious performance-oriented reforms of these organizations would both a goal worth achieving and an objective likely to generate sustained enthusiasm from several of the major and middle power democracies, all of whom rely on the multilateral system and regret American dis-attention to it.

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