

US President to Host Summit for Democracies in December: Strengthening Global Community, Combatting Authoritarianism

According to a recent White House press release, the **US President Joseph Biden** will convene a virtual **“Leaders’ Summit for Democracy”** on *December 9 and 10* to *“galvanize commitments and initiatives across three principal themes: defending against authoritarianism, fighting corruption, and promoting respect for human rights.”* Following a period of *“consultation, coordination, and action”*, the US leader will invite the world leaders again, in person, one year later, *“to showcase progress made against their commitments.”*

The initiative may not be regarded as an isolated action, but rather as a corollary of the US diplomatic efforts in the Biden-era. One may refer, in this regard, to the significantly enlarged G7 of Carbis Bay, where the Prime Ministers of Australia and India and the Presidents of Republic of Korea and South Africa participated as invitees, the NATO Summit in Brussels, and, finally the EU-US Summit on *June 15*.

One may also notice, in this regard, a departure from the former *“business oriented”* Trump-like approach of the US Diplomacy toward a rather traditional *“special relationship”* narrative among democracies. While the term, coined by Winston Churchill, has been previously used to describe the particular affinities between the United States and the United Kingdom, which have prevailed from the Great War to the War on Terror, it may be soon extended – and popularised – over a larger spectrum of democracies. Geographically, democracy has now extended worldwide and so is the US diplomacy, as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue showcases, *inter alia*; under such circumstances, **one may find it natural for such an affinity to extend not only to Europe, but to Asia and beyond as well.**

Similarly, the US initiative openly aims at *“defending against authoritarianism”*. Furthermore, the US Department of State pointed, in relation to the expected Summit, that *“authoritarian leaders are reaching across borders to undermine democracies—from targeting journalists and human rights defenders to meddling in elections all while claiming their model is better at delivering for people. Hostile actors exacerbate these trends by increasingly manipulating digital information and spreading disinformation to weaken democratic cohesion.”* In this regard, it is beyond a shadow of a doubt that the **high-level meeting in December is meant to send a strong signal to authoritarian actors, not in a bellicose manner, but rather as an expression of common will to stand together and “prove democracy still works and can improve people’s lives in tangible ways.”**

Depending on its success, **the Summit for Democracies has great chances of gaining momentum as an informal – yet periodical – meeting** of *“heads of state, civil society, philanthropy, and the private sector”*, since a second summit has already been announced. It is not out of the question that the Summit may well turn into a formal institution, governed by a Charter, which would – obviously – create added weight in the international arena. Surely,

similar initiatives are already in place; the Community of Democracies – presided by Romania since September 2019 – is a suggestive example in this regard. However, provided the expected amplitude of the “*Summit for Democracies*”, its impact can only be beneficial to the global community of democratic nations.

Projecting democracy as a unifying factor in the international community also signals a major return of Constructivist ideas in international relations. The basic Constructivist tenet, as postulated by Alexander Wendt, establishes “*that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature.*” Diverging from the functionalist theory of International Relations – as illustrated in the economic-focused G8, G14 and G20, *inter alia* – a return to Constructivism as self fulfilling prophecy in International Relations may focus less on pragmatic economic cooperation and more on improving shared governance values, such as “*strengthening accountable governance, expanding economic opportunities, protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, and enabling lives of dignity.*” Little wonder that, according to the US Department of State, the Summit is set to “*show how open, rights-respecting societies can work together to effectively tackle the great challenges of our time, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and growing inequality.*”

Clearly, **an inclusive “Summit for Democracies” and not “of democracies” would also send strong signals of hope toward peoples governed by fragile democracies and autocratic regimes.** To the same degree of extent, it is not unlikely to rally fragile democracies and provide fertile ground for democratic consolidation if not state-building. Ideally, such an initiative would provide a strong incentive for multilateralism – at global level – and a democratic society domestically.

Naturally, as every major international initiative, effervescences are not out of the question and Washington could meet what some may deem opposite views on behalf of certain international actors. So far, the reaction of the **Russian Foreign Minister** points at the potential risk of polarising the international community as, according to the Russian high official, “*the initiative is in line with the Cold War spirit as it is the declaration of a new crusade against all those who don’t share these ideas.*” According to **Chinese media commentators**, Washington’s initiative tends to “*weaponize democracy, and insult the word <<democracy>>*”. So far, Beijing has not released any official statements on the matter. No official comments on the matter have been identified on behalf of the newly elected conservative government of **Iran** and a reaction on behalf of **North Korea** is yet to be issued.

Of course, **a particular attention should be paid on conceptualizing democracies**; inviting certain countries in the light of their democratic features, while ignoring others, may generate unnecessary tensions. Hence, **defining clear and transparent standards of participation becomes essential.**

A significant hurdle may arise from a **different level of prioritization on behalf of the prospective participating states.** The reasoning for democracy does not necessarily coincide with the economic interests of democratic states. The recent reaction of France to the Aukus pact (*comprising of the US, UK and Australia*) is an illustrative example in this regard. In the same key, the US reaction to the construction of the Russian-German Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline is equally relevant.

Furthermore, **matching the Summit’s deliverables and outcomes with other major international initiatives, such as G7’s Build Back Better World, is highly relevant for a comprehensive outlook of its effects**

over the global community. A closely coordinated string of major international initiatives would positively contribute to generating more responsive and resilient partners and hence galvanise an authentic global community. On the contrary, fostering an exclusive group of states may create the illusion of parochialism and consequently undermine its very objectives.

It is in this regard that, **most importantly, a “Summit for Democracies” should be truly democratic in its outreach and not limit itself to the two sides of the Atlantic, but similarly include Asia and other democratic countries as well. Ultimately, it is the best way to showcase Democracy as Global Value.**

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