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World Order Re-founded: The Idea of a Concert of Democracies

Emiliano Alessandri

Plans contemplating new arrangements for the “democracies” of the international system have multiplied in recent years. The Princeton Report of September 2006 contained a proposal for a treaty-based “Concert of Democracies”.¹ Just a few months later, *The American Interest* hosted a provoking article entitled “Democracies of the World, Unite”, advancing a similar suggestion.² In *America at the Crossroads*, Francis Fukuyama envisioned a new organisation of the democracies to revive multilateralism.³

Some American political leaders have rushed to endorse these plans. John McCain, the Republican senator currently in the race for the White House, for example, has spoken of a “League of Democracies” as “the core of an international order of peace based on freedom”.⁴ Meanwhile, since 2000, a Community of Democracies (CD) has brought together a coalition of over a hundred countries “committed to democracy”.⁵

Underlying these initiatives is, ultimately, the belief that democracy is a superior principle of international legitimacy and provides the most solid foundation for world order. In fact, the starting point is the grim observation that universalistic institutions, from the Wilsonian League of Nations onwards, have delivered far below expectations. As the advocates of this view eloquently explain, universalism tends to reduce international legitimacy to a “procedural question”, that is, to the

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¹ Ikenberry and Slaughter, *Forging a World of Liberty Under Law*. The Report represents the culmination of a three-year bipartisan initiative, “The Princeton Project on National Security”. Co-directed by political scientists G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, the project brought together leading thinkers from government, academe, business and the non-profit sector to discuss the future of US national security.

² Daalder and Lindsay, “Democracies of the World, Unite”.

³ Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads*, 176-80.

⁴ McCain, “Address at the Hoover Institution on Foreign Policy”; more recently, McCain, “An Enduring Peace Built on Freedom”.

⁵ The CD was inaugurated in June 2000. The initiative was promoted by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. To date, the CD has held periodic conferences and developed a light institutional structure including a “Democracy Caucus” inside the United Nations.

number of states concurring to a certain decision. What should matter, instead, is “the nature of the states consenting to it”:⁶ world order would derive its legitimacy not from the universalistic character of its institutions, but from the universal value of the “democratic principle”.

Given these premisses, it should come as no surprise if the immediate target of these plans is the United Nations, which the proponents of “uniting the democracies” intend either to reform radically or supplant altogether.⁷ The UN is accused of having been in a state of permanent illness since the moment it was created over sixty years ago. Impotent during the bipolar era, when the Soviet Union and the US kept the Security Council hostage with their veto power, the UN has since then missed the opportunity to undertake serious reform after the end of the Cold War.

Its weakness is attributed primarily, although not exclusively, to the very principles regulating its membership: an institution based on “the sovereignty and equality of states”, irrespective of the nature of their regimes, it is argued, tends to be afflicted by recurrent impasses because of the fundamental gap in accountability and commitment between democratic and non-democratic states.

Deliberately provoking and grandiose, the idea of a Concert of Democracies has engendered great controversy. Initially confined to academia and punditry, the discussion has now invested the public debate at large. What seems interesting and useful, therefore, is to clarify the genesis, intellectual and historical, of this view. Moreover, it seems important to discuss the main contentious elements of this line of thinking so as to be able to have a better understanding of the terms of the debate developing around it.

An old idea with distinguished supporters

The idea that democracy can function as an organising principle of political life not only *within* but also *among* states, is indeed a rather old one. With deep and ramified roots in Western political thought – suffice it to remember Immanuel Kant’s seminal reflections on the democratic foundations of “perpetual peace” – it is, however, in the American context that this idea has traditionally attracted more adepts.⁸ Virtually all of the most recent proposals have come from American scholars and thinkers. It is also in the United States that these visions have characteristically crossed the borders of pure intellectual speculation to be embraced by some of the most distinguished political leaders. President Wilson’s famous statement that America’s aim upon entering World War I was “to make the world safe

⁶ Daalder and Lindsay, “Democracies of the World, Unite”, 10.

⁷ Former Assistant Secretary of Defense, Richard Perle has made no secret about wanting a “Concert of Democracies” to replace the United Nations. See, Perle, “Concert of Democracies: A Response”, 16.

⁸ For a discussion of Kant’s contribution to the modern theory of the “Democratic Peace”, see Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part I”.

for democracy” embodied the aspiration of a democratic world order and was echoed by a long series of similar pronouncements throughout the 20th century.⁹

In the end, the League of Nations’ final design was not based on the democratic principle but on the more traditional one of the sovereignty and equality of states. “Self-determination” rather than “democracy” became the catchword of the Versailles peace conference and the organising principle of the international settlement following the war.¹⁰ Moreover, as is often noted, the United States failed to join the newly created institution, thus crushing hopes that America’s unprecedented involvement in international affairs would be the prelude to the creation of a democratic, not only stable and peaceful, world order.

The second rendezvous with history came only twenty-five years later with the end of World War II. This time, the US did not retreat into political isolation. However, the design of the United Nations organisation departed once again from the vision of a democratic world order. Due, among other reasons, to Roosevelt’s alleged realism, not only was the UN founded on the traditional principle of the sovereignty and equality of states, but its universalism was to be amended by the institution of a sort of directorate, the Security Council, where the most powerful nations, democratic or not, would rule over the most important matters concerning security and peace.¹¹ In other words, neither the membership nor the leadership of the new organisation were to be democratic.

The fact that the UN was set up according to these principles should not lead one to underestimate, however, the role that other views played in the debate of the time. The idea that the true guarantee for a peaceful world order was to be found in the democratic principle had actually never lost currency during the interwar period, even after the eclipse of Wilsonianism. In fact, it acquired new relevance and urgency with the rise of revisionist and war-prone authoritarian regimes around the world.

Proposals multiplied in the 1920s and ’30s to stem the spread of authoritarian nationalism by strengthening the ties among the democracies and creating supra-national institutions that would limit the principle of national sovereignty.¹² In the English-speaking world especially, it was international federalism that was to dominate the academic and political debate of the interwar and war years on how to safeguard international peace.¹³ Back then, in fact, international organisation was often synonymous with international federation.¹⁴

⁹ On Wilson’s vision of a democratic world order and his political legacy, see in particular, Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century*.

¹⁰ See Davis, *Pioneers in World Order*.

¹¹ On the establishment of the UN, see, in particular, Schlesinger, *Act of Creation*.

¹² See, for instance, the reflections of Sir Norman Angell, from his *A Plea For the Protective Union of The Democracies* to his *Peace With The Dictators?*

¹³ See the seminal reflections on international federation by Philip Kerr, British Ambassador to Washington in 1939-40, in *Approaches to World Problems* and *Pacifism Is Not Enough*.

¹⁴ See Strauss, “Atlanticism in the 20th Century”.

If, in the case of Britain, international federation was explored as an instrument to reform the British Empire so as to arrest its decline (the vision that inspired the creation of the Commonwealth),¹⁵ in the American context, federalism seemed to be the obvious formula to which to turn when approaching the question of order among states. The history of the United States could, in fact, be read as that of a federation of formerly sovereign states whose growth over time coincided with the creation of an ever larger area of peace and order. According to some, the “more perfect union” that the Constitution of 1787 pledged to establish, was not necessarily confined to the North American continent. On the contrary, it has been argued, it identified “an open community of states” devoted to the practice of the democratic principle that could, in time, expand throughout the world.¹⁶

These and similar views enjoyed rather widespread, although not general, support from the US political elites and appealed to several of the United States’ future leaders, such as John Foster Dulles, the Republican senator who would serve as Secretary of State under President Eisenhower. An expert on international law, Dulles was persuaded that the ideal path to a democratic world order could be found in the limitation of national sovereignty and the international application of the federal principle.¹⁷

Intellectually, these ideas were developed by a wide array of American thinkers who tried to combine creatively the American federalist and democratic traditions. Seminal was the work of the American journalist Clarence Streit, still an important intellectual reference for the proponents of uniting the democracies.¹⁸ A *New York Times* correspondent from Geneva, Streit followed the gradual decline of the League of Nations and came to the conclusion that no organisation including democratic and non-democratic states alike could ever solve the problem of international instability. The core of Streit’s vision was contained in the best seller *Union Now*.¹⁹ Published on the eve of WWII, this pamphlet put forward the idea of federating the democracies of the North Atlantic, in that, by pooling their resources, they could outbalance the Axis and win the war. The second step was to make this democratic union the nucleus of a future world democratic order. Translated into several languages, *Union Now* attracted the attention of numerous

¹⁵ See, for instance, the plans developed by the “Round Table”, an institution founded in 1909 to study the problems of the British Empire. See, especially, the reflections of the British federalist Lionel Curtis, in *The Problem of the Commonwealth* and *Civitas Dei*.

¹⁶ This view has fascinated entire generations of Americans since the foundation of the United States. See, for instance, the considerations of American historian John Fiske in *American Political Ideas Viewed from the Standpoint of Universal History*.

¹⁷ Dulles, *War, Peace, and Change*.

¹⁸ See Doyle, “Liberalism and World Politics”, 1151-69. Streit is a central intellectual reference for both political scientist John Ikenberry, a leading advocate of a “Concert of Democracies”, and James Huntley, former president of the Atlantic Council of the United States (ACUS), and a promoter of the CD. See, Ikenberry, “Creating America’s World”, and Huntley, *Pax Democratica*.

¹⁹ Streit, *Union Now*.

statesmen in the United States and beyond, including some of the founders of NATO.²⁰

The Cold War: a vindication?

While this and similar proposals seemed doomed when the UN Charter was drafted according to the traditional principle of the sovereignty and equality of states, the ideals that had inspired them experienced a revival when the Cold War broke out. It suddenly became clear that the Soviet veto could paralyse the newly established organisation indefinitely and frustrate once again any hopes of a democratic world order rising from the ruins of the war. Thus, the view spread that what had failed at the global level could nonetheless take place on a lower scale in the more homogenous and “like-minded” West.²¹

As has rightly been noted, two international orders were established after WWII:²² on the one hand, Cold War bipolarity, based on traditional considerations of power politics and symbolised by the deadlock of the UN system; on the other hand, a “Western order”, built on institutions such as NATO and united under US leadership. This second order was in a sense the closest thing to the realisation of the original American vision of a democratic international order. War became unthinkable in the Euro-Atlantic area and scholars endeavoured to establish a connection between the diffusion of democracy and the absence of military conflict, the so-called democratic peace.²³

The convergence of strategic interests and the increasing socialisation of economic and political practices, moreover, made it common to refer to the countries of North America and Western Europe as a single community or civilisation.²⁴ Although not immune to internal disputes, *de facto*, the West integrated deeper and faster than any other area of the planet, so that it became commonplace to identify it with the engine of what later came to be called globalisation.²⁵ Furthermore, a political experiment took place in the heart of the West which, although the result of specific historical circumstances and unique in form, nonetheless bore some analogy with the American experience with federalism: European unification.²⁶

²⁰ Theodore Achilles, one of the drafters of the North Atlantic Treaty once stated: “If it hadn’t been for *Union Now*, I don’t think that there would have been a NATO Treaty... from here came the whole idea of Atlantic unity...”. John Hickerson, Achilles’ senior at the State Department, asked his collaborators to read *Union Now* before concluding the NATO negotiations. The quotation is from “Association to Unite the Democracies”, <http://www.iaud.org/history.html>.

²¹ See, for instance, US Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Review of the United Nations Charter*.

²² Ikenberry, *After Victory*.

²³ Among others, see Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*.

²⁴ Seminal was Deutsch’s *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area*.

²⁵ The West is still characterised by the highest degree and fastest pace of integration. See, Hamilton and Quinlan, *The Transatlantic Economy 2006*.

²⁶ See, among others, Harper, “In Their Own Image”.

More critically, the Western system incarnated earlier visions of world order because the political principles and economic practices cultivated within it were considered universal. The Atlantic community was seldom interpreted reductively as a bloc or an exclusive club. On the contrary, it was generally conceptualised as an area defined by the acceptance of certain values rather than by mere geography or geopolitics.²⁷ The inclusive nature of the Atlantic community meant that its borders were considered negotiable and never to be rigidly drawn on the map. The West's mission was actually identified as much with integration within as with expansion outside, starting with the inclusion of the former "enemies of democracy": Germany, Italy and Japan. But democracy promotion became a hallmark of the Western strategy throughout the various phases of the Cold War also because it was seen as a powerful tool for speeding up the collapse of the Soviet bloc.²⁸

What was clear in the minds of Western elites, in fact, was which of the two postwar orders would eventually prevail: containment was conceived as a temporary strategy to protect the Western order while it was consolidating within; the attractiveness of Western principles and practices, however, would ultimately lead to the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, the dismantlement of Cold War bipolarity, and the worldwide extension of the Western order.²⁹ The establishment of a democratic world order was, in other words, just a question of time.

The end of the Cold War: the revival

This helps explain the revival of the idea of uniting the democracies in the 1990s, when the Cold War came to an end. The advent of the new era, it was thought, made the establishment of a democratic world order more realistic and at the same time more necessary and urgent. There were several factors purportedly pointing in this direction.

The first was, of course, the capitulation of the Soviet Union and the discrediting of communism which, combined, opened up the prospect of worldwide diffusion of the liberal principles and practices of the West; hence, economically, phenomena such as the "Washington consensus" and, intellectually, the triumphalism of the "end of history".³⁰

²⁷ See, for instance, the definition of "free world" given by President Truman in the Inaugural Address of 20 January 1949, in *Public Papers of the Presidents*.

²⁸ On the role of democracy promotion in the US Cold War strategy, see Smith, *America's Mission*.

²⁹ This "prophecy" was made by several American statesmen in the early days of the Cold War. The most notable was probably George Kennan, the head of the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department and the "architect" of containment.

³⁰ "Washington consensus" refers to the economic recipe – a mix of privatisation and liberalisation – that Western-led, Washington-based international institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, applied to several developing countries in the 1990s. The "End of History" is the title of a famous essay by Francis Fukuyama, later extended into a book, in which the American political scientist provokingly argued that with the triumph of liberalism at the end of the Cold War, history itself might come to an end. See, Fukuyama, "The End of History?"

The second factor was growing economic interdependence, which many thought would prove incompatible, at least in the long run, with an international order based on the traditional principle of national sovereignty. This led to the burgeoning literature on globalisation.³¹

A third factor was that sovereignty turned out to be challenged not only from outside but also from within. While globalisation made the peoples of the planet more interdependent, it was also accompanied by the resurgence of deep-rooted hatreds within societies, especially in the form of ethnic and religious strife. The 1990s were the years of the bloody civil war in Yugoslavia, of humanitarian interventions and nation-building operations in the failed states of the Third World.³²

Together, these factors were taken as evidence that the principles that had governed the Western order during the Cold War could and should now be implanted in other areas of the world. Only a democratic world order, many argued, could win the challenge of globalisation, deal with the erosion of sovereignty, and stem the resurgence of violence by expanding political and economic freedom. Democracy was not just the winner by default of the epochal struggle between the “free world” and communism; it was the prophecy of the 20th century and the goal toward which all human societies would tend, if free. Democratic transition was celebrated as the defining trend of the new era.³³

It should be noted that this optimism did not translate into a revival of the UN. Hopes of resurrecting the universalistic institution were short-lived. Soon after the successful management of the Iraq crisis of 1990-91, which led President George Bush Sr. to speak emphatically of “a new world order”,³⁴ the world organisation became the target of growing criticism, especially in the US. New motives were added to the old ones but, in the end, the institution’s illness was identified with its original weaknesses: the organisation remained hostage to its most intransigent members.

With the Clinton administration, a change in approach was already underway. Although never abandoning the goal of UN reform, the public rhetoric and policies of the first administration of the post-Cold War era closely reflected the intellectual tradition described above, with its preference for the democratic principle over alternative approaches to world order.³⁵ Clinton’s National Security Advisor, Anthony Lake, advocated that

³¹ See, among others, Robertson, *The Three Waves of Globalization*.

³² For an analysis of US foreign policy in the 1990s, with particular regard to military interventions, see Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace*.

³³ See, for instance, The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, 1991.

³⁴ Bush, *Toward a New World Order*.

³⁵ On the transition from Bush Sr. to Clinton, see the recent book by Brzezinski, *Second Chance*.

containment be replaced by a strategy of enlargement.³⁶ With the defeat of the Soviet Union, he argued, the area of democracy and peace created under the Western order could now spread throughout the world to encompass the entire international system. It was under the leadership of Secretary of State Albright, moreover, that the Community of Democracies initiative was launched in 2000 in Warsaw, in the heart of the former Soviet bloc.

Meanwhile, NATO enlarged to accompany the democratic transition of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and took the centre stage in the management of international security, as manifested by the Kosovo intervention of 1999. Conversely, the prestige of the UN was further undermined by a long series of failures, including the embarrassing and tragic experiences with Somalia in 1992 and Rwanda in 1994.

The focus on democracy

The fundamental assumption of the intellectual and diplomatic tradition just described is that democracy is a central category for understanding the evolution of the international system, and the correct analytical standpoint from which to tackle the age-old question of what makes world order. Strictly connected with this assumption, and actually deriving from it, is a distrust for “universalism”, precisely on the grounds that universalistic institutions recognise in principle equal dignity to all states, whether democratic or not.

According to the proponents of uniting the democracies, this indifference towards the nature of the internal regime of states amounts to a misrecognition of the value – ethical, historical, but also practical – of the democratic principle.³⁷ The idea that what guarantees world order is the mere number of states concurring in a certain decision sounds to them as an obsolete way of thinking at best, if not a sort of “betrayal” of the ideals inspiring the Western democratic tradition.

The idea that the democratic principle has universal value and that the advancement of democracy is a yardstick for gauging the progress of human societies is not only a central element of Western rhetoric, but has also entered Western political culture to become a popular and appealing concept in the public opinion.³⁸ In this respect, the view that world order should be based on democracy rather than on the traditional principle of the sovereignty and equality of states should not sound particularly scandalous. On the contrary, what should look less and less defensible is the old conception that international legitimacy is just a matter of consensus among sovereign states. The deference of many in democratic countries to the

³⁶ Lake, *From Containment to Enlargement*.

³⁷ See, for instance, Daalder and Lindsay, “Democracies of the World, Unite”.

³⁸ See, Pinkney, *The Frontiers of Democracy*.

universalistic principle as the basis of international legitimacy is a puzzling element, especially if motivated not by mere realism but theorised as the only possible approach.³⁹

The focus on the democratic principle is nevertheless highly problematic for a number of reasons. The basic problem resides in the tendency to look interchangeably at democracy as an “ideal” inspiring the Western strategy and a “category” for interpreting the recent history of the international system, as if the two things necessarily coincided.⁴⁰ In doing so, the risks are many, including a certain finalism which leads one to read events instrumentally and approach history deterministically.

To contend that democracy is a superior principle for the organisation of international life is not the same thing as proving that the most correct way to read the evolution of the international system is to concentrate on the dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism. The two arguments may both be acceptable, but they are nonetheless distinct and need a separate set of arguments and evidence to support them.

The history of the past century, in fact, can be read as a struggle between competing political ideologies, as is done by the proponents of uniting the democracies, but also as a contest between alternative models of production and development.⁴¹ An element that is in fact often downplayed in the interpretation of history provided by the representatives of this tradition is the level of pluralism among Western societies themselves. The notion of a “free world” united against the Soviet challenge does not do justice to the existence within the West of different traditions of liberalism and capitalism, not to speak of vast sectors adhering to socialist and communist ideals.

If this observation is extended to include societies not in the West, then it is hard to deny that the level of development is a much more relevant category than democracy.⁴² As is often noted by the critics of this tradition, countries like India and Brazil, which would qualify for membership in the Concert of Democracies, generally prefer to bond with other developing countries, if only to hegemonise them, rather than to mate with their former “masters”.⁴³

To dismiss this attitude as “old thinking” may be a legitimate reaction, but it does not seem to constitute a serious way of approaching the issue, even if it is dealt with exclusively as an “identity problem”. A more correct approach should start by

³⁹ For a review of the arguments defending the UN as the primary source of international legitimacy, see the online forum on “After the UN, What?”, *TPM Café*, <http://www.tpmcafe.com/story/2005/9/15/214025/794>

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Huntley, *Pax Democratica*.

⁴¹ See Reynolds. *One World Divisible*.

⁴² See, for instance, Dirlík et al., *History after the Three Worlds*.

⁴³ See, for instance, the position of James Traub, “Democracies of the World, Unite: Cont’d.”.

clarifying the exact relationship between democracy and development, a link that should not be taken for granted.⁴⁴

The international behaviour of democracies

A further problem of the tradition described here has to do with the behaviour of democracies when dealing with other nations as well as with each other. Even here, there seem to be several problems and sources of confusion. The question is in fact whether democracies are more inclined to cooperate internationally and whether their decisions and actions are more legitimate than those taken by universalistic institutions that include both democratic and non-democratic states.

The democratic peace theory, mentioned earlier, tries to explain the international behaviour of democratic regimes, but concentrates almost exclusively on the question of war and peace. Its findings and conclusions – which enjoy widespread but certainly not general support from experts – can hardly be extended to encompass the much broader issue of international cooperation and its logics.⁴⁵

Another important field, possibly much older than the democratic peace theory, is constituted by the relationship between democracy and international organisation, starting with the history of federalism and of supranational institutions.⁴⁶ Here, however, the picture is less simple than is commonly portrayed. On the one hand, it seems fair to acknowledge that democracies have been the most ready to accept limitations on their sovereignty, as evidenced, for instance, by the evolution of the doctrine of human rights.⁴⁷ Federalist experiments, moreover, seem to have been successful only among democratic countries, from the American federation to the British Commonwealth. Although not a classical case of federation, the most notable example of unification in the postwar period, the European Union, has taken root in the heart of democratic Europe.⁴⁸

Yet, while this is undeniable, an element interestingly overlooked by the advocates of uniting the democracies is that democracies have not always welcomed the evolution of international law and organisation with the same degree of favour. The United States, the “champion” of democracy *par excellence*, has in recent times displayed a markedly uncompromising attitude towards international institutions.⁴⁹ US presidents, even before the administration of George W. Bush, have resorted to unilateral practices and claimed exceptions and waivers from

⁴⁴ For a discussion, see Chan, *Liberalism, Democracy and Development*.

⁴⁵ For an overview of the debate surrounding the “Democratic Peace theory”, see Brown *et al.*, *Debating the Democratic Peace*.

⁴⁶ See, among others, Holdstedt, *Federalism*.

⁴⁷ See Donnelly, *International Human Rights*; also, Slaughter, *A New World Order*.

⁴⁸ See, among others, Fabbrini, *Democracy and Federalism in the European Union and the United States*.

⁴⁹ For a discussion, Foot *et al.*, *US Hegemony and International Organizations*.

international law in the name of sovereignty.⁵⁰ Contrary to what is generally suggested by the proponents of uniting the democracies, the failing record of UN reform has been due not only to the intransigent behaviour of non-democratic powers, in particular China and Russia, but also to the rivalries and mutual jealousies among the world's democracies, especially the European members of the Security Council.⁵¹

The political dimension

A review of the contentious elements of this tradition would not be complete if it did not discuss the most immediate political dimension of the idea of a Concert of Democracies. What are, in other words, the motivations and goals of those who are currently propounding this view?

The Concert of Democracies is predominantly, although not exclusively, an American idea, which has been developed to deal primarily with the future of US international hegemony from an American standpoint. No top-level European political leaders have to date endorsed these plans. Support for these initiatives has come only from limited sectors of the European intellectual elites.⁵²

Interestingly, in the United States, support for the idea of a Concert of Democracies has come from American intellectuals and leaders with very different political orientations, including liberal internationalists, Republican internationalists and neo-conservatives.⁵³ Only recently, the neo-con Robert Kagan, co-signed an article with the advisor to Barack Obama's campaign, Ivo Daalder, endorsing the idea of a Concert of Democracies. The piece, disquietingly entitled "The Next Intervention", argues that the "policy of seeking consensus among the world's great democratic nations can form the basis for a new domestic consensus on the use of force".⁵⁴ Then again, the same interesting connection between some sectors of liberal internationalism and fringes of neo-conservatism is evidenced by the Princeton Report itself, the preparatory work for which was done, among others, by John Ikenberry, a prominent liberal internationalist, and Francis Fukuyama, a former neo-con.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ See, among others, Ignatieff, *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*.

⁵¹ See, for instance, Atlantic Council of the US, "UN Reform: Views From Europe and the US".

⁵² In Europe, *The Economist* has paid only passing attention to the idea of a Concert of Democracies; *The Guardian* has dedicated an article to the Princeton Project.

⁵³ This aspect has been emphasized by renowned foreign policy commentator, Timothy Garton Ash, who has praised the Princeton Report as the basis for a new bipartisan approach to US foreign policy. See T. Garton Ash, "This Marks the Beginning of an End - and the End of a Beginning". *The Guardian*, 9 November 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,1942905,00.html>

⁵⁴ I. Daalder and R. Kagan, "The Next Intervention", *Washington Post* (6 August 2007), A17[0].

⁵⁵ Ikenberry and Fukuyama co-chaired the Princeton Project working group on "Grand Strategic Choices". See <http://www.wws.princeton.edu/ppns/groups/GrandStrategy/index.html>

All or most recent proposals seem to share the same preoccupation. With the partial exception of the CD, which dates back to 2000, all others deliberately deal with the crisis of US leadership following President Bush's controversial response to terrorism. Fukuyama's suggestion to explore new forms of multilateralism is made in the context of an introspective book in which he reviews his previous beliefs and acknowledges the flaws of Bush's strategy after 2001. The Princeton Report was conceived as an effort to seek a new consensus on foreign policy after the publication of the highly contentious National Security Strategy in September 2002.⁵⁶ The distinctive features of this attempt to respond to the current impasse are the willingness to explore solutions bridging different approaches to foreign policy; a focus on international institutions; and the idea of addressing the question of world order afresh to give US leadership a more solid foundation in the 21st century.

These plans have to be given credit for a change in perspective – a true reversal – on institution-building. One of the most neglected aspects of the post-Cold War era is the fact that, unlike after other major confrontations such as WWI and WWII, the US did not show any particular interest in creating new institutions ratifying the changes that occurred at the international level.⁵⁷ There were several reasons for this, among which the facts that the Cold War was not a war in the traditional sense, that a complex system of international institutions was already in place by the time it was over, and that some institutions, like NATO, did undergo important adjustments after the end of the bipolar era. The most important reason, however, was that unipolarity was generally seen as requiring the United States to work less actively with and within international institutions.⁵⁸ This was true, to some extent at least, even before the Bush administration's drift towards unilateralism.⁵⁹

Against this background, the proponents of uniting the democracies seem to want to revive the American tradition of institution-building, the one that inspired the creation of the League of Nations and the UN, but express a preference for institutions that are multilateral (but not universalistic, based on the principle of sovereignty, and therefore not supranational) and democratic. In so doing, a middle ground is found between the liberal internationalists' traditional emphasis on multilateralism and a reliance on international institutions as instruments to restrain both the United States' "imperial temptations" and the neo-conservatives' characteristic distrust for international organisations and the United Nations in particular.

⁵⁶ The Princeton Report is thought of as a "collective Mr. X article", that is, a document of strategic synthesis, like the famous article written under pseudonym by George Kennan in 1947 that popularised the doctrine of containment. The National Security Strategy of 2002 can be accessed at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2002/index.html>

⁵⁷ This is a recurrent motif in the scholarship of John Ikenberry, see *After Victory*, especially, "After the Cold War", 215-56.

⁵⁸ See, in particular, Krauthammer, *Democratic Realism*.

⁵⁹ Disappointment in wide sectors of the American left with Clinton's record on institution-building and multilateralism was recognised by one of his strongest supporters, international relations expert Stephen Walt, "Two Cheers for Clinton's Foreign Policy".

Also, democracy promotion is saved and actually revived as a political and strategic goal, even if not according to the interpretation given it by the Bush administration, which went so far as to justify the use of US military power on the grounds that it served the cause of democracy in the world.⁶⁰ The idea is now to pool the resources of the existing democracies and provide them with new responsibilities and institutional devices to give them even greater leverage on the international scene. This, it is argued, would create a sort of virtuous and self-sustaining circle by which close coordination among the democracies would function as an engine for international reform. Those countries left out of the “club” of the democracies would in fact experience a decline in status and influence, unless they joined the club themselves.⁶¹

The Concert of Democracies and world order

As for the vision of world order that this view entails, the analysis cannot but be largely speculative.

What is certain is that, if created, a Concert of Democracies would divide the United States’ alleged rivals. India and Brazil would qualify for membership in the new organisation. Russia and China, instead, would be isolated within the international system. Their power within the UN would remain largely unaltered, but the prestige and authority of the Security Council, where they now sit as permanent members, would likely be impaired by the creation of another directorate of the world’s leading democracies.⁶²

The same reasoning would apply to America’s traditional allies, especially Europe. Remarkably scant attention is paid to, or perhaps deliberately diverted from, what can be seen as the world’s largest organisation of democracies already in place today: the European Union. Although the goal of stronger transatlantic ties generally ranks high among the recommendations of the proponents of uniting the democracies, the schemes outlined to date do not look at Europe as a single political entity but rather as a group of sovereign states to be invited into the new arrangements separately, by virtue of the democratic nature of their regimes and not as members of a community of nations aspiring to greater international visibility and leverage.⁶³

⁶⁰ Daalder and Lindsay, *America Unbound*, 116-29.

⁶¹ This idea is developed both in the Princeton Report and in the article by Daalder and Lindsay.

⁶² It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the former prime minister of Russia, Evgeny Primakov, firmly opposed the Concert of Democracies and espoused the idea of a Community of Great Powers as a better approach to world order. Primakov, “Democracies of the World, Unite: Cont’d.”

⁶³ See, Ikenberry and Slaughter, “Forging a World of Liberty Under Law”, 25-26. The Princeton Report, to be true, recognizes the growing international role of the EU and invites the US to accommodate to this new reality, starting with new forms of cooperation within NATO.

Since all members of the European Union would qualify for membership, this would give each of them new visibility and power. At the same time, however, Europe as a whole would lose the increased bargaining power achieved through Union. This would clearly make the US a *primus inter pares* within the concert because its power would be unparalleled, unless European countries would activate some form of coordination among them such as by creating a “European caucus” inside the new institution. Whether the overall balance would be positive or negative is hard to tell, though, because much depends in any case on Europe’s willingness to proceed towards greater integration in foreign policy, a field that still remains markedly intergovernmental. What is fair to imagine, however, is that the creation of a new organisation would not encourage this process. Transatlantic interaction would more than likely resemble a “hub and spokes” model.

As for the United Nations, the creation of a Concert of Democracies could give a boost to UN reform, as many advocates of this view argue.⁶⁴ But what would the role and authority of a reformed UN be, if the Concert of Democracies had in the meanwhile subtracted important prerogatives from the Security Council? Even if the UN were not supplanted by the new organisation, the risk of establishing a new double track international order would be high.

The most serious consequence would perhaps derive from the splitting of international legitimacy and power. Unless the creation of a Concert of the Democracies triggered instantaneous democratic reform in countries such as China and Russia – a prospect that not even the most enthusiastic proponent of this view can consider realistic – international power would be divorced from international legitimacy, with the latter monopolised, in a sense, by the new democratic organisation and the former divided among the great powers of the international system.⁶⁵

Bound to remain an idea?

Although it has never materialised, the vision of a democratic world order has been a constant source of inspiration for the policies generally associated with the successful history of the West, and the United States in particular, in the past century. It is a vision that still has appeal, if only because it embodies aspirations, such as the defeat of authoritarianism, that enjoy widespread support not only

⁶⁴ See, G. J. Ikenberry and A. M. Slaughter, “A Bigger Security Council, with Power to Act”, *The International Herald Tribune*, 27 September 2006, 8.

Ikenberry and Slaughter, “A Bigger Security Council, with Power to Act”, 8.

⁶⁵ This concern has been expressed by, among others, Brent Scowcroft, former National Security Advisor under Bush Sr. “Seeing the Concert of Democracies as some sort of a new bloc in world affairs”, Scowcroft remarked, “is a bad idea. It is not useful at this juncture to again be dividing the world up between the good and the evil”. B. Scowcroft, “The Dispensable Nation?”, *The International Herald Tribune*, 7 August 2007, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/08/07/opinion/edschowcroft.php?page=3>

among the Western public opinion. As is often the case with lofty ideals, however, its concrete application to reality is highly problematic.

Distrust for universalism, as has been noted, is also a recurrent sentiment in the history of Western strategy, and dissatisfaction with the record of universalistic institutions is a well taken point: the League of Nations did not prevent WWII, and the United Nations did not end the Cold War, not to mention the long series of national and regional conflicts that followed. This, however, does not prove by itself that a democratic world order is within reach. Despite the enthusiasm for democratic transition at the beginning of the 1990s, several nations of the world have entered the new century as non-democracies, including some of the most powerful ones. This should invite the proponents of this view to carefully reconsider their belief that the advancement of democracy has been both an aspiration and an actual international trend in the past centuries

Even if it were concluded that action has to be preferred to passivity, and that the world's democracies would in any case be better off united than divided, then a debate should be opened on the actual content and exact targets of such a transformation. As has been noted, the schemes outlined to date display a certain bias, if only because they have been conceived not just as outlines for a future world order, but also as prescriptions to cure the US' loss of leadership and popularity in recent years. This could explain a certain lack of interest, or even suspicion, among Europeans, as well as the opposition coming from those countries that would be excluded from the new arrangements.

Until widely debated among the various components of today's global democratic public opinion, and unless divorced from a finalistic interpretation of history that tends to obscure reality by interpreting international events and dynamics instrumentally and self-deceptively, the idea of uniting the democracies seems to have only limited prospects of success.

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