

# LONELY AT THE BARRICADES

How to Strengthen the  
Global Defense of Democracy

Edited by Benjamin N. Gedan

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COVER IMAGE: May 12, 2017 Venezuelan security forces crack down on anti-government protestors in Caracas in 2017. Source: [REUTERS / Carlos Garcia Rawlins](#)

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Police spray pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong with a water cannon in September 2019. Source: Isaac Yeung / Shutterstock.com

## Introduction

### Lonely at the Barricades

Myanmar's ousted leader is on trial and opponents of the military junta have taken up arms. The Chinese Communist Party, after bulldozing Hong Kong's democratic institutions, is sending fighter jets to menace Taiwan. Generals disrupted Sudan's democratic transition, while in Tunisia the president shuttered the parliament. In Latin America, celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the Inter-American Democratic Charter are drowned out by debate over how to dislodge dictatorships in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, or at least how to keep teetering democracies from following in their path.



In Europe, Hungary and Poland ostentatiously flout European Union (EU) rules on the rule of law. Across the Atlantic, lawmakers are investigating an assault on the U.S. Capitol designed to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power. The drumbeat of democratic decline feels less like the end of history and more like the end of days.

This month, however, the cavalry arrives. Or at least convenes.

On December 9-10, 2021, President Biden, as promised during his campaign, is hosting democratic leaders to regroup to defend democracy. Disagreements over the Summit for Democracy invitation list have been instructive, mired in definitional disputes and pitting piety against pragmatic engagement with leaders who would bring de minimis democratic credentials to the virtual gathering. Critics of the conference declared its failure preemptively; you don't bring a communique to a gunfight.

But in some ways, the summit is already a success. As the authors in this Wilson Center collection explain, Biden's call to action was not met with debate over the scale of the problem. From old-fashioned coups d'état in Mali and Guinea to a stolen presidential election in Nicaragua, this year has left little doubt that authoritarianism is on the march.

The whys and what to do about it, however, are considerably more complex.

Myanmar, the "most egregious example of democratic rollback" in Southeast Asia, is perhaps the most distressing case, Ye Myo Hein and Lucas Myers write. The February coup was the first test of Biden's

democracy agenda, and the United States and its allies forcefully condemned Aung San Suu Kyi's jailers. That criticism, however, did not deter the junta's brutal repression of dissent. Today, "the people of Myanmar are increasingly exasperated" and losing faith in the U.S. commitment to democratic values. That U.S. failure has raised questions about whether Washington can safeguard other vulnerable democracies, including Taiwan, which Beijing is impatient to subsume. As "battle lines sharpen between authoritarianism and democracies," Vincent Chao writes, Taiwan is enduring "relentless pressure by authoritarian forces."

Traditionally, repressive actors like Myanmar's Tatmadaw might have feared not only U.S. condemnation, but also Europe's democracy brigade. These days, however, the EU has its hands full policing its own members, and neighbors such as Belarus. Inside the bloc, Hungary and Poland, longtime "democracy delinquents," threaten to "unravel its capacity to build consensus on fundamental issues," Teresa Eder writes.

As a result, regional institutions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have become indispensable foot soldiers in the global battle for democracy. In theory, they joined this fight long ago. At the Organization of American States, for example, democracy is the ticket to ride. Distressingly, however, Latin America is paralyzed by "centrifugal dynamics and a weakening of multilateralism," Diego García-Sayán writes. Other regional organizations, such as the African Union, have adopted strong codes to promote democracy and human rights, but they have struggled with enforcement, as member states hide behind claims of sovereignty and insist upon non-interference.



There are success stories, though. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, Prosper N. N. Addo writes, multilateral organizations midwifed recent democratic transitions through efforts to “translate and reconcile democratic norms and values among multiple and diverse stakeholders.” The African Union reacted strongly to recent military coups, including by suspending membership and imposing sanctions, though its response is muted when leaders cling to power through rigged elections or by manipulating constitutions.

Multilateral organizations, however, need to set a higher bar for the region’s democracies, Ida Sawyer writes: “Democracy should not be seen as a ‘tick the box’ exercise, applied selectively, where success is judged by the absence of a coup.” Indeed, after the voting, democracy advocates are too often left alone to protect democratic institutions. Throughout Africa, Babatunde Olanrewaju Ajisomo writes, “without an effective governing system supported by true separation of powers, checks and balances, an independent judiciary, a free press, and a robust and politically active civil society, elections have little or no impact on freedom, quality of life, and equality across the continent.”

Even in their failures, multilateral institutions can be essential first responders to a democratic SOS. As referees, they “provide a measure of the deviation from norms that societies are experiencing,” Miriam Kornblith writes, and furnish “guidance and an institutional pathway to close that gap.” Yet on their own, they are unreliable ramparts. “Out-gunned, out-manned, out-numbered, out-planned.” Which is why the Summit for Democracy, for all its controversies and limitations, is such an urgent event.

Today’s global democratic recession is not an inevitable, natural phenomenon. That does not mean the planet’s authoritarian forces will be easily contained, or that the United States and its allies have the tools, resources, and credibility to defend fragile democracies and promote democratic norms in the marketplace of ideas. Still, summit stocktaking is a reasonable first step. At minimum, it is a chance for leaders to make sure democratic societies are not making things worse. “We are on the edge of a cliff,” Daniel Baer writes, “and far too many in Europe and the United States are urging us to drive over it and see whether the car will bounce.”

—**Benjamin N. Gedan**, Deputy Director, Latin American Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars





Demonstrators outside the United Nations protest Alpha Condé's controversial election to a third term as Guinea's president in October 2020. In September 2021, Condé was ousted in a coup d'état. Source: John Nacion / STAR MAX/IPx via AP

## The Role of Multilateral and Regional Organizations in the Promotion of Democracy and Good Governance in Africa

*By Prosper N.N. Addo*

### Democracy and Governance in Africa

Relics of Africa's past, manifested in slavery, colonialism, and the Cold War in Africa, have promoted authoritarianism, human rights abuses, and corruption, and created tensions, as norms and values of the "Global North" are imposed on the "Global South." These challenges have brought about intrastate and interstate conflicts, coups d'état, electoral malpractice, and term limit extensions, among other negative trends that have undermined democracy, good governance, and integration on the continent. In their efforts to find solutions to these problems, the contributions of multilateral organizations (MOs) and regional organizations (ROs) in consensus-building remain a work-in-progress, and future success requires genuine leadership and respect for progressive cultural



norms, values, and diversity. As the African Union (AU) and other ROs seek to promote democratization, recognition of and respect for local contexts and indigenous stakeholders, and the importance of credible partnerships, are essential.

## Democracy and Governance

Good democratic governance entails the judicious use of power and authority to facilitate decentralization and inclusive decision-making and problem solving directed toward social impact and transformation. It requires respect for the rights of individuals, transparency and accountability, and

prevention of corruption, which together create a safe environment for the dignity of individuals, freedom and justice, free speech, and freedom of association to exist and flourish. These universal norms and values, which nevertheless straddle multitudes of formal and informal governance cultures, are interpreted differently in reality, and must be reconciled. Reconciliation must accommodate translation of democratic norms and values via dialogue and discursive processes in hybrid contexts of tradition and modernity.

## Achievements and Challenges

In Africa, some states, in partnership with MOs, ROs, and civil society organizations (CSOs), have served as good examples of the pursuit of democracy and good governance. They include countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Kenya, and South Africa, which have

maintained fairly stable democracies over decades. Building strong democratic institutions through political reforms, however, is an ongoing effort across much of the continent. The challenges of weak institutions and bad governance must be reversed to promote a peaceful, stable, and developed Africa.

## Multilateral Organizations

MOs and ROs, serving as supranational bodies, have played major roles in promoting good governance in member states. They have adopted many conventions, charters, and protocols and undertaken policy interventions to assist

***Building strong democratic institutions through political reforms, however, is an ongoing effort across much of the continent.***

in promoting democracy and governance on the continent. For instance, the AU has its African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (ACDEG), while the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has its Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. MOs and ROs have established legal instruments to address human rights, anti-corruption, security, and humanitarianism. While they have proffered standard cultural and governance norms and values, implementation difficulties, related to issues of sovereignty and enforcement powers, are evident when member states flout these principles.

## Influences, Impact, Progress, and Prospects

The transformation of the Organization of African Unity into the AU in 2001, and the ongoing reforms to make it more responsive to political, security, and development



crises in Africa, reflect positive aspirations for peace and democracy on the continent. Some ROs, like the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), ECOWAS, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), have contributed to these aspirations. Partnerships with the UN, EU, and other ROs outside Africa have been significant, but these interventions require more social impact, particularly at the grassroots level. Some countries in post-conflict situations, like Liberia and Sierra Leone, have made progress in their governance and democratic journeys thanks to support from MOs and ROs.

The unique partnership between the Liberian government and the international community, and the coordination and collaboration among international partners in the transition of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), is a credible example for promoting democracy in Africa and beyond. Regular meetings among international partners, in which ECOWAS, the AU, and the UN served as a “troika” that played a mediator function, facilitated conflict prevention and resolution among government officials and civil society. In particular, the troika’s ability to translate and reconcile democratic norms and values among multiple and diverse stakeholders was invaluable in

peacebuilding and statebuilding. The international community supported the troika’s efforts to mediate and resolve disputes within the three branches of the government and with the political opposition. It also helped calm restive youths and opposition groups, and made collective calls for the respect of human rights, transparency, and accountability.

## Conclusion

Going forward, MOs and ROs need to establish more formidable partnerships to promote good democratic governance in Africa. External partners, including the U.S. government, must recognize the diversity of cultures, norms, and values, and pursue collaborative ways of improving democracy by taking into consideration the “hybridity,” “non-linearity,” and “contextual divide” characterizing relations between the “Global North” and the “Global South.” Of equal importance is the need for African leadership to improve continental and regional peer-review mechanisms and find collaborative ways of discouraging bad governance. It can do this by establishing multilateral enforcement powers of the norms, values, and principles guiding good governance and democracy on the continent.

## About the Author

**Dr. Prosper Nii Nortey Addo** served as the African Union’s senior political/humanitarian affairs officer in Liberia and in Sudan. He holds a PhD in defense studies from Kings College London, and has widely published on peace, security, and governance issues.





In October 2021, Sudan's military seized power, derailing the country's transition to democracy. Source: [Osama Eid \(CC BY-SA 3.0\)](#).

## Strengthening ECOWAS and AU Capacity to Defend Democracy

*By Babatunde Olanrewaju Ajisomo*

Democracy, peace, and human rights are prerequisites for sustainable human development; their mutually reinforcing interlinkages in Africa are indisputable. The Biden administration's Summit for Democracy comes at an opportune time, with the challenges bedeviling democracy becoming global. In Africa, as elsewhere, weak political and economic institutions coupled with poor leadership and bad governance have led to dictatorships and/or prolonged and sit-tight regimes that flaunt the rule of law and ignore the separation of powers.

Subsequent protests by the populace, as well as the violent abuse of human rights, have often followed, including in the recent unconstitutional removals of democratic governments through coups d'état in Mali, Guinea, Chad, and Sudan.



The African Union (AU) (together with its predecessor organization, the Organization of African Unity) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

commemorated their 58th and 46th year anniversaries, respectively, in May 2021.

The AU has historically set aspirational goals for democracy promotion and peacebuilding, for example, stating that, “by 2020, all guns will be silent.” It has also built an expansive normative framework and established mechanisms and institutions for implementation. ECOWAS focused its own normative framework on preventing conflicts and strengthening democracy, following the outbreak of civil war in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea Bissau in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Unlike the Organization of African Unity Charter (1963), which embraced the doctrine of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, the AU Constitutive Act (2000) advanced a new doctrine of non-indifference to human rights abuses within the territory of AU states. This doctrinal shift should embolden the AU’s democracy-promotion and human rights agenda, especially in fragile and conflict-affected states. The AU has also developed an institutional setup – the Peace and Security Council (PSC) – to deal with conflict prevention and unconstitutional changes of government in a systematic and firm manner. The PSC also has a mandate to promote democracy, recognizing the intrinsic connections between democracy, security, peace, and human rights. ECOWAS instruments for strengthening democracy

include the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security (1999), the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy

and Good Governance (2001), and the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (2008).

Since its creation in 2001, the AU has demonstrated

a mixed record in its efforts to promote democracy and human rights in Africa. In many instances, the AU has succeeded in galvanizing attention and mobilizing pressure where constitutional norms are breached, such as military power seizures, or leaders arbitrarily and flagrantly amending constitutions. In addition, the AU and ECOWAS have facilitated democratic progress in peaceful elections and credible transfers of power in a number of countries, including Nigeria (2015), Ghana (2016), Liberia (2017), Cape Verde (2016 and 2021), Sierra Leone (2018), Mauritius (2019), Burkina Faso (2015 and 2020), Malawi (2020), Seychelles (2020), and the Central African Republic (2020).

However, despite examples of procedural electoral success, there is a big gap between electoral and governing processes. While elections are indeed a critical part of democracy, without an effective governing system supported by true separation of powers, checks and balances, an independent judiciary, a free press, and a robust and politically active civil society, elections have little or no impact on freedom, quality of life, and equality across the continent.

With respect to the 1999 and 2001 ECOWAS protocols, the 1999 protocol focused on conflict management

***This doctrinal shift should have emboldened the AU’s democracy-promotion and human rights agenda, especially in fragile and conflict-affected states.***



and security, leaving out the promotion of democratic governance and institutions that help ensure conflict prevention and the protection of human rights and freedoms. Two years later, the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance was enacted to prevent internal crises and strengthen democracy and good governance, the rule of law, and human rights.

Notably, when regimes have come to power more recently through coups d'état in this subregion, including in

Mali and Guinea, or attempted coups such as in Niger, they were roundly condemned by ECOWAS, the AU, and the United Nations.

In countries where the military has taken power, and in others that are experiencing democratic reversal via tenure elongation and unlawful amendments to constitutions, such as in Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, and lately in Guinea, sustained robust engagement is required. Such engagement could include targeted sanctions to prevent unconstitutional breaches and to deter other would-be autocrats. That said, ECOWAS should be commended for its decisive action to restore democracy in The Gambia, including [the collective consent](#) of ECOWAS heads of state, in 2017, to authorize military force to drive Yahaya Jammeh from the capital, Banjul, and allow a democratically-elected president, Adama Barrow, to be sworn into office.

Unfortunately, 2020 and 2021 saw major reversals of the democratic gains recorded from 2016 to 2020. As a result, ECOWAS and the AU are holding a series of meetings at the highest levels with the military juntas

that illegally took power and subverted democracy in Mali, Guinea, and Sudan.

ECOWAS and AU capacity-building assistance to member states to support democratic governance is grossly insufficient to address apathy toward political parties that operate with little transparency and integrity,

and election commissions appointed by ruling elites.

Equally worrisome is the problem of extreme poverty that often makes

voters vulnerable to vote buying, accentuated by poor voting infrastructure that facilitates election rigging and often results in protests and violence. ECOWAS has supported member states electoral processes through capacity building and engagement with political parties and civil society organizations and through election monitoring, observation, and technical and financial assistance. The ECOWAS Court of Justice, another space for deepening democratic governance, has reviewed cases related to elections and democratic governance crises from across the sub-region.

Unfortunately, the ECOWAS Court's rulings are often not respected or enforced. That said, it deserves praise for the recent establishment of a legal aid fund to facilitate access for victims of human rights abuses.

Funding is an important challenge for multilateral organizations, including in West Africa. ECOWAS is dependent on member state statutory contributions, derived from levies and duties on goods imported from third countries. In most cases, member states delay payment to ECOWAS, despite repeated warnings and threats of sanctions. ECOWAS recently began

***ECOWAS should be commended for its decisive action to restore democracy in The Gambia.***



sanctioning members that do not pay their dues by denying nationals of these countries appointments to ECOWAS positions. This effort should be sustained to serve as a deterrence to other potential defaulters. The AU has even bigger challenges with funding, as it has depended heavily on contributions from development partners to fund most of its activities due to non-payment of annual dues or delays in payment by most member states. Recent reforms to establish a more sustainable funding strategy include a sanctions regime to ensure member states timely meet their financial obligations.

Expression and demonstration of strong political will by the multilateral organizations in Africa, coupled with undiluted commitment by member states toward enforcement of the community instruments and the transparent implementation of democratic norms and practice, would go a long way to guarantee, promote, and defend democratic governance. Happily, there is a consensus among AU and ECOWAS member states about defending democracy and protecting human rights and respect for the rule of law. As part of strengthening democratic institutions in West Africa and on the continent as a whole, ECOWAS and the AU need to

***Funding is an important challenge for multilateral organizations, including in West Africa.***

further develop the early response component of the early warning continental architecture to prevent reversal of democratic gains and the breakdown of order and political stability. Moreover, to forestall coups, and the temptation for politicians to tamper with constitutions, ECOWAS should adopt and

institutionalize a peer review system, akin to the AU's African Peer Review Mechanism.

The Biden administration should also enhance America's support for democratic institutions in Africa, including multilateral organizations, through targeted support for improved elections. The multilateral organizations in Africa are already playing leading roles in this regard, including electoral conflict prevention, mediation, and promotion of dialogue, and their activities could be even more effective through support from the U.S. government. Relatedly, the Biden administration should use the Summit for Democracy to consider scaling up assistance to credible African civil society and non-governmental organizations to enable them to be more active in promoting inclusiveness, transparency, the rule of law, and human rights. Finally, the U.S. government should also increase assistance and support to multilateral organizations and member states by partnering to promote good governance and openness.

### ***About the Author***

***Ambassador Babatunde Olanrewaju Ajisomo*** served as special representative of the president of the ECOWAS Commission to Liberia from 2013 to 2020, following a distinguished 31-year career in the Nigerian diplomatic service.





Sudanese demonstrators in November 2021 protest a military coup that disrupted the country's democratic transition. Source: AP Photo / Marwan Ali

## Resetting U.S. and AU Approaches to Democracy Promotion in Africa

*By Ida Sawyer*

The Biden administration's Summit for Democracy provides an opportunity for the United States and African countries to reset national and multilateral approaches to democracy promotion. Despite glimmers of hope, including in [Zambia](#) and [Niger](#), the past year has been bleak for democracy across much of the continent, with military coups in [Chad](#), [Mali](#), [Guinea](#), and [Sudan](#), and incumbent leaders elsewhere clinging to power following elections that were neither free nor fair, including in [Uganda](#) and the [Republic of Congo](#).



Last year in Guinea, Alpha Condé’s efforts to push through a [constitutional referendum](#) that allowed him to [run](#) for a third term were marked by violence and widespread popular resistance – and helped create the conditions for this year’s military coup. Also in 2020, Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara

[won](#) what many believed to be an unconstitutional third term in a campaign marred by violence.

He is hardly alone; leaders in Cameroon, the Comoros, Djibouti, Rwanda, and elsewhere, all manipulated their countries’ constitutions to stay in power.

The African Union (AU) [responded](#) strongly to recent military coups, with the notable [exception](#) of the military takeover in Chad, including by suspending membership and imposing or threatening sanctions. But its [response](#) has been [muted](#) when leaders cling to power through rigged elections or the manipulation of constitutions, allowing them to present a façade of democracy when the reality is often anything but.

The response from the United States and other international players is seen by many in Africa as similarly inconsistent. The United States imposed targeted sanctions on leaders in [Burundi](#) and the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) when they attempted to extend their constitutional mandates, but there was little reaction beyond statements of concern when leaders from neighboring [Republic of Congo](#) and [Rwanda](#) did the same. Significant pressure on [Uganda](#), including targeted sanctions, only came after President

Yoweri Museveni had manipulated the constitution and secured a sixth term earlier this year.

To achieve real progress toward people-centered and accountable democratic governance, the bar must be set higher. Democracy should not be seen as a “tick

***Democracy should not be seen as a “tick the box” exercise, applied selectively, where success is judged by the absence of a coup.***

the box” exercise, applied selectively, where success is judged by the absence of a coup and the fact that an election took

place or a change in leadership occurred. Rather, democracy is a long-term, high-maintenance and continuous work in progress, dependent on the creation and continuity of independent, credible, and transparent institutions, the rule of law, respect for freedom of expression, association and assembly, and leaders accountable to the electorate.

The AU and its member states should update the 2000 Lomé Declaration and the 2007 African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (ACDEG) to explicitly ban efforts by leaders to retain power by changing [term limits](#) and [manipulating constitutions](#), as [proposed](#) in previous drafts of the declaration.

Such language would give the AU a stronger basis to respond to other forms of democratic backsliding beyond military coups. Ghana’s president and the current chair of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has strongly [advocated](#) for ECOWAS to adopt similar provisions. During an extraordinary [meeting](#) of the ECOWAS Parliament in October, participants [recommended](#) that the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good



Governance prohibit all forms of political maneuvering to evade constitutional term limits.

To enhance its early warning response, the AU could establish an elections observatory to monitor pre-electoral conditions, speak out against negative trends, and proactively report to the AU Peace and Security Council.

As we've seen in the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), [Senegal](#), [Sudan](#), and elsewhere, popular protests can be critical for galvanizing

democratic change and forcing repressive or authoritarian leaders to make concessions.

The AU and its member states, the United States, and other donors should commit to supporting civil society and professional organizations across Africa to educate Africans about their rights, to protect activists, and to facilitate exchanges between movements across the continent and internationally. They should also support civil society coalitions advocating for an end to impunity, and establish or strengthen specialized judicial mechanisms that prosecute serious crimes and target individuals whose quest for impunity might impede a democratic transition. Support to independent media outlets that can credibly report on electoral conditions is also critical.

When there is widespread repression, or authorities use other tactics to undermine the credibility and independence of elections, targeted sanctions – including travel bans and asset freezes that target individuals, not the broader population – can be

effective tools to impose consequences for human rights abusers. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, [targeted sanctions](#) imposed by the United States and the European Union played an important role in building pressure on former President Joseph Kabila to organize elections and step down, after he had exceeded his constitutionally mandated, two-term limit.

The AU has applied targeted sanctions in response to military coups, but the tool could likely be even more effective if also used in response to other

attempts to undermine democracy, including the manipulation of constitutions, in Africa and elsewhere. Development of a new

***Popular protests can be critical for galvanizing democratic change and forcing repressive or authoritarian leaders to make concessions.***

AU policy framework for targeted sanctions – including criteria for when they should be applied and how they could be lifted – and the establishment of a unit responsible for preparing sanctions lists and monitoring enforcement, would be an important goal. The U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control could work closely with such a unit to share information and exchange best practices.

Before elections, the AU, United States, and other international partners should start early in supporting long-term election observation and deploying technical experts. From the start of electoral preparations, observers and experts should have full access to monitor the activities, financing, and spending of electoral commissions, and report early and publicly about any concerns, including political interference,



manipulation of voter rolls, corruption, or the misappropriation of funds. In the lead-up to election day, training and support for groups to observe elections and conduct parallel voting tabulation would make it harder for an incumbent to engineer a fraudulent result, and provide regional and international actors with evidence and justification to reject manipulated results, as we saw recently in [Zambia](#).

When there is blatant manipulation of election results, the AU, the United States, and other partners should forthrightly denounce it. But when the opposite occurs, they should not assume democratic progress just

because an incumbent is voted out of office. Africans across the continent have taken to the streets and made immense sacrifices to press for democratic change. Leaders should stand in solidarity with them, and focus on the hard work of building credible institutions and processes that would allow democracy, human rights, and development to flourish long after the votes are counted. The United States, in its follow-up to the White House Summit for Democracy, should make its response to democratic backsliding more consistent across different countries and regions, while committing to strengthen democracy and human rights at home.

### **About the Author**

**Ida Sawyer** is a public policy fellow at the Wilson Center. She is on sabbatical from Human Rights Watch, where she is the deputy director of the Africa division.





In December 2019, hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong demonstrators rallied in support of universal suffrage and the direct election of members of the Legislative Council.  
Source: Jimmy Siu / Shutterstock.com

## Taiwan: A Glimmer of Hope in East Asia

*By Vincent Chao*

John Sudworth, the BBC's top correspondent in Beijing, has won awards for his reporting on China's systemic oppression of the Uighur people. Earlier this year, his relentless drive for the truth became too much for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). A coordinated effort to discredit the BBC, label Sudworth's reporting as "anti-China," and threaten him with legal repercussions began. Plainclothes police officers even followed his hasty exit to the airport.

Sudworth, like a growing number of his colleagues before him, ended up in Taiwan. The Taiwan Foreign Correspondents Club, whose numbers have been bolstered by journalists chased out of China, welcomed him: "We hope you feel safe and unencumbered working in Taiwan."



As Chinese President Xi Jinping intensifies his crackdown on political and social diversity inside and outside his borders, the contrast between Taiwan and China has grown. Taiwan has emerged as a beacon of light in Asia, where the freedoms of speech, assembly, and religion are seen not as liabilities, but strengths. It has become a hub for progressive values, as the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage. And it is a model for how modern democracies can manage the coronavirus pandemic, without resorting to draconian lockdowns and limits on personal freedom.

Taiwan is far from perfect. But in its constant strive to improve, there is recognition of the importance of contributing to and benefiting from discussions over global democratic governance. Its adversity in the face of relentless pressure by authoritarian forces provides Taiwan with a unique perspective to offer the international community. Exclusion from the United Nations and other organizations also dictates a need to engage on global issues with creativity and pragmatism.

The United States plays a strong role in supporting such initiatives. Just last month, Taiwan and the United States concluded a new round of consultations centered around democratic governance in the Indo-Pacific. Topics included cooperation on anti-corruption, open government, and human rights. Both sides highlighted disinformation as a critical threat to democratic

institutions, pledging to build partnerships to counter information manipulation.

Another important platform is the Global Cooperation Training Framework, a series of regionally focused workshops jointly initiated by Taiwan and the United

States. These sessions have attracted over 3,300 experts from 100 countries to tackle issues ranging from media literacy to women's economic

empowerment. They have underscored Taiwan's capacity to contribute to critical topics for growth, while forging new channels between civil societies and activists around the world.

While these developments have been positive, there is no doubt more can be done. Taiwan's vulnerabilities to CCP influence operations demonstrates the need to aggressively defend democracy, while stopping short of censorship and compromise over Taiwan's core values. Taiwan should also be anticipating, instead of simply responding to, growing sophistication in the use of manipulated media, including deepfakes, artificial intelligence, and other sources of synthetic content. None of this will be easy.

Fortunately, there are growing signs of a more coordinated global response. As battle lines sharpen between authoritarianism and democracies, there is recognition that like-minded countries need to engage and learn from each other. The difficulties faced by Taiwan may one day challenge Australia or the United

***As Chinese President Xi Jinping intensifies his crackdown on political and social diversity inside and outside his borders, the contrast between Taiwan and China has grown.***



Kingdom, and vice-versa. It is in the interests of all democracies to work together, knowing full well that this is a campaign no one can afford to lose.

Taiwan benefits when countries examine this problem collectively. As democracies grapple with authoritarianism both inside and outside their borders, and societies struggle with emerging challenges posed by new technologies, a common set of principles and best practices helps ensure that no democracy is left to fend for itself. Equally important, a shared response ensures that countries don't end up compromising their own values in their fight against authoritarianism.

This process can turn Taiwan's vulnerabilities into strengths. Its inability to participate in existing international organizations will inevitably lead to a focus on new ones, particularly those centered

on democratic governance. The constant pressure it faces from CCP disinformation and gray zone tactics brings about a greater ability to contribute to global discussions, with first-hand experiences and information. Internal political divisions can be reconciled by a renewed emphasis on international

cooperation, highlighting cooperation with like-minded partners.

President Biden's

Summit for Democracy is an ideal platform for this. By acknowledging that democracy is under threat, it forces stakeholders to face the problem head-on, and to do so collectively. While weak democratic institutions, tenuous rule of law, and corruption confront new democracies, authoritarians are exporting their ideology. A catalyst for global democratic renewal is not only timely, but needed.

***By acknowledging that democracy is under threat, it forces stakeholders to face the problem head-on, and to do so collectively.***

### ***About the Author***

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Demonstrators in Myanmar protest against the military coup in March 2021. Source: R. Bociaga / Shutterstock.com

## Lofty Rhetoric, Lack of Action on Democracy in Southeast Asia

By *Ye Myo Hein and Lucas Myers*

For the past 15 years, Freedom House’s annual [index of democracies](#) has marked significant decreases in the number of “free” countries and an expansion of authoritarianism. Responding to this global crisis, President Biden’s [Summit for Democracy](#) promises to focus on three broad themes: defending against authoritarianism, fighting corruption, and advancing respect for human rights. Yet this lofty rhetoric has often failed to result in concrete policy action, as demonstrated in the limited efforts of the United States and its allies and partners in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) in Myanmar and Southeast Asia more broadly. In short, although the Quad and the United States rhetorically emphasize protecting democracy, divergent national interests and a lack of enthusiasm have watered down the Biden administration’s democracy promotion agenda.



## Southeast Asia's Democratic Retreat

Southeast Asian democracy has been on the retreat for years. As of the [2021 Freedom House report](#), no country in ASEAN ranks as “free,” and *The Economist's 2020 Democracy Index* identifies no “full democracies” in the region. Of course, vast differences prevail across each country, with “illiberal democracy” in the [Philippines](#), party-state rule in Vietnam, and a brutal military junta in Myanmar.

But the general trend is negative. Importantly, this decline is not a function

of limited popular support for democracy, but rather [elite capture of institutions](#) and outright military intervention. One only needs to consider the widespread resistance to the coup in Myanmar, and the #MilkTeaAlliance movement in Hong Kong, Myanmar, Taiwan, and Thailand, to see democracy's ingrained support in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, democracy is suffering in every ASEAN country.

Perhaps the most egregious example of democratic rollback is in Myanmar. Beginning in 2011, the country started a democratic transition, albeit a [troubled](#) one. However, the military, known as the Tatmadaw, would not accept its [landslide defeat](#) in the 2020 elections and overthrew the civilian government on February 1 of 2021. The Tatmadaw subsequently botched a [Thai-style consolidation](#) and [resorted to indiscriminate violence](#) against the opposition, led by a loose coalition of ousted lawmakers, known as the National Unity Government (NUG), and ethnic armed organizations. This spiraled into what can now only be [described](#) as a full-scale civil war.

Although Myanmar was by no means a strong or stable democracy pre-coup, the situation represents a stark defeat for what was once [hailed](#) as a democratic success story.

Considering the severity of its democracy crisis, and Southeast Asia's strategic position at the center of the Indo-Pacific, Myanmar would seemingly be a priority for any democracy agenda. Indeed, the Quad quickly

rallied to express its deep concerns and its commitment to promote “[democratic values](#).” But,

while stirring, this response was only surface deep, as the United States, Australia, India, and Japan refrained from [strong policy actions](#). Today, the coup in Myanmar illustrates the failure of the Biden administration and its allies and partners to defend democracy.

## Disappointment in Myanmar

Days after the military coup, protestors gathered in front of the U.S. Embassy in Yangon to demonstrate against the military dictatorship and demand international assistance. The protestors called for [help from Washington](#), holding placards with slogans such as, “We want democracy,” “We need action from U.S.,” and, “We, Myanmar's people, fully support every action that the U.S will take against terrorist dictatorship.”

This protest exhibited now deflated expectations that the United States would act to support democracy. Initially, many in Myanmar hoped that the Biden administration would militarily intervene, and the NUG's foreign affairs minister went so far as to call for a no-fly zone in an essay in *The New York Times*. However,

***Southeast Asian democracy has been on the retreat for years.***



democracy activists have grown disillusioned, with no concrete actions except statements and targeted sanctions. To be sure, the deal with China at the United Nations to support [the representative](#) of the ousted National League for Democracy; the U.S. pledge of [\\$50 million in humanitarian aid](#); and occasional [meetings](#) with NUG leaders are beneficial, but Washington has hesitated to take actions that would truly bite. In Myanmar, hopes for meaningful international action have withered, as the NUG remains unrecognized and lacking in real support.

Likewise, critics of Myanmar's dictatorship were exuberant when the Quad called for the restoration of democracy and cessation of violence. In the nine months since the coup, the bloc has demanded that the Tatmadaw "[restore the democratically elected government](#)," emphasized "[the priority of strengthening democratic resilience](#)," and urged an "[end to violence in Myanmar, \[and\] the release of all political detainees](#)." However, these statements were never followed by concrete actions.

There are several reasons for this inaction. Australia, Japan, and India are concerned that opposing the junta will push Myanmar further into China's embrace. Despite suspending military support and expressing grave concern over the coup and crackdown on dissent, Australia has [resisted global pressure](#) to impose new sanctions. For its part, Japan has halted aid to Myanmar, but otherwise [adopted a passive sort of diplomacy](#). Instead of taking action, India has taken pains not to

upset Myanmar's military; New Delhi avoided [harshly condemning the coup](#), sent military representatives to [the junta's military parade in March](#), and abstained from voting on the [United Nations General Assembly resolution](#) on the coup. India even appears to retain its military-to-military relations and [arms supply](#)

agreements with the junta. Perhaps because of its reluctant allies and partners, the United States has largely

gone it alone on Myanmar, despite [statements to the contrary](#), and still lacks a concrete policy for rolling back the coup.

The people of Myanmar are increasingly exasperated with the Quad, and losing faith in its commitment to democratic values. In a subtle linguistic irony, "Malabar," the name for the annual Quad military exercises, translates to, "it will not come" in Burmese. When the Quad's [exercises](#) began in August 2021, Myanmar people mockingly observed that the Quad intentionally gave the name "Malabar" to the exercises to signal that "it will not come" to help Myanmar's people.

This inaction on the part of the international community has consequences: Myanmar is increasingly looking like a failed state. Amidst the repression, the regime's opponents have taken up arms, as their hope for outside assistance during the early days of peaceful protests was not met. Ultimately, the United States and its closest allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific have [done little to promote democracy](#) in Myanmar or elsewhere in Southeast Asia, whether out of competing interests or a fear of harming ties to friendly autocrats.

***This protest exhibited now deflated expectations that the United States would act to support democracy.***



## Looking Ahead

The Summit for Democracy will showcase this conflict between interests and values. According to a list obtained by *Politico*, and reporting by *Foreign Policy*, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines will be invited from ASEAN to participate in the summit. However, the leadership in *Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila* are all steadily eroding democratic norms, but seldom receive criticism from Washington. Indeed, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has *avoided mention* of Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte's transgressions so as not to jeopardize a *Visiting Forces Agreement*. Similarly, the White House summary of Biden's meeting with Indonesian President Joko Widodo labeled Indonesia, the "*world's third-largest democracy*" without mention of his antidemocratic conduct. The inclusion of these leaders in the summit says more about U.S. geostrategic calculations vis-à-vis China than U.S. values.

## About the Authors

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There is, however, still time to stop democratic decline and help the U.S. and its partners reclaim credibility as defenders of democracy. This change should start in Myanmar, where the United States should appoint a special envoy, and invite representatives from the NUG to the Summit

for Democracy.

Furthermore, the Quad should establish a joint strategy to deepen cooperation with ASEAN on Myanmar.

***This inaction on the part of the international community has consequences: Myanmar is increasingly looking like a failed state.***

Effective multilateral pressure would likely require secondary sanctions on foreign companies still doing business with the junta. Beyond this, expanding support for beleaguered *civil society actors* across the region would represent a long-term means of enshrining democracy. For now, democracy in Southeast Asia hangs on a knife's edge, and the multilateral organizations and great powers with the most interest in promoting it have largely declined to intervene.





Migrants collect supplies in Belarus in November 2021 after Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko reportedly lured them to the border with the European Union (EU) to provoke an EU migration crisis. Source: Leonid Shcheglov/BeITA via AP

## At the Summit for Democracy, I'm Looking for Authentic Expressions of Urgency, Not Checklists

By Daniel Baer

In a year in which global crises – the pandemic, economic challenges, climate – have consumed our attention, President Biden's Summit for Democracy may not make as many headlines as once hoped. That's a shame, because democracy, too, is going through a multifaceted international crisis. And for all its disappointments, for all the ways reality fails to live up to theoretical and moral ideals, constitutional democracy remains the most effective political system for protecting individual rights – and the free and meaningful lives that are enabled by them – while managing the decisions and challenges our societies face.

In 2018, German Chancellor Angela Merkel [observed of World War II](#) that, "We now live in a time in which the eyewitnesses of this terrible period of German history are dying." It is only after those who saw and felt the



horrors of that war have left us, Merkel posited, that, “it will be decided whether we have really learned from history.” Merkel’s summary of this open question of history reflects what I call the “family money” theory of democratic decline. There’s an old belief that family fortunes tend to be made by the first generation, sustained by the second, and squandered by the third. A similar predilection may attach to political institutions.

The generation that builds democratic institutions is often inspired by having experienced the deprivations of their absence, and therefore understands how precious and fragile they are, how sacred the principles are that underlie them. Their children grow up with the benefit of the institutions and their parents’ commitment to them. But the next generation takes the democratic institutions for granted – it has no memory of the alternative or direct connection to their founders – and endangers them through neglect and negligence.

In the case of family money, the cycle starts over (if a family is lucky) with relative destitution and then a new generation that doesn’t take wealth for granted and understands the value of work and sacrifice. In the political realm, the degradation of institutions and the return of cruder forms of human competition often result in violence. Four score and seven years after the U.S. Declaration of Independence that preceded the Revolutionary War and the establishment of American democracy, Abraham Lincoln consoled a republic divided and endowed U.S. democracy with new meaning at Gettysburg. Four score and seven years after the start of World War II will be 2026.

### ***Democracy, too, is going through a multifaceted international crisis.***

The fundamental question for North America and Europe is whether it will once again take a war for us to understand the pricelessness of our democracies. War with each other may seem unlikely. But the risk of political violence within our societies, or of new incarnations of interstate conflict in the [Western Balkans](#), [South Caucasus](#), or even on the [EU’s eastern border with Belarus](#), is mounting. Russia’s war against Ukraine, and Vladimir Putin’s efforts

to squelch Ukraine’s democratic revolution, have lasted seven and a half years so far, with Putin now poised for [a new escalation](#). Today, in addition to proliferating state-associated [cyberattacks](#), the possibility of armed conflict, [including nuclear war](#), between global powers is higher than it has been since the end of the Cold War.

If we can speak of those in the transatlantic space who are democracy-watchers (and democracy-kibitzers, -cheerleaders, and -handwringers) as a kind of identifiable community, then those of us in that community have expectations for the Summit for Democracy that are paradoxically both too big and not big enough.

I’ve read the essays and participated in roundtables that have parsed the organization and agenda for the summit, demanding that it produce concrete steps, [robust to-do lists](#), and accountability measures for follow-up actions. Others have noted the inadequacy of a “[menu of options](#)” approach.

I’ve read the analyses that treat the invite list as fodder for a kind of [gossip column for foreign policy nerds](#)



– “who’s in, who’s out at Joe Biden’s democracy shindig!” – and to be sure, there is much to discuss. Though the summit is undeniably appealing as an idea, putting it into practice was always going to be fraught; choosing attendees would inevitably devolve into bureaucratic debates that would lead to a lowest-common-denominator approach. And that approach would not be enough to avoid the criticism that some country [ought to be invited that wasn’t](#), even as it [guaranteed that some who were invited shouldn’t have been](#).

And I’ve read the [critiques that question](#) whether such a summit will

make much of a difference at all, given the challenges democracy faces in the world, and whether the United States should be focused on democratic backsliding “out there” in the world when it faces worsening democratic challenges at home.

In many of these respects, I think expectations are too high. The summit will not be a panacea, the implementation of the action items will be at best uneven, the final participant list will be unsatisfying, and the assembled group of governments too unwieldy in number and varied in their commitment to the cause to agree on real substance in a two-day gathering. Yes, of course, the Biden administration and other leaders should take advantage of the summit to engage meaningfully with civil society and generate pledges to make progress on the [three pillars](#) of the

***Though the summit is undeniably appealing as an idea, putting it into practice was always going to be fraught.***

***The stakes for democracies are really, really high.***

summit’s agenda. But we know ex ante that it will not address all the problems with democratic backsliding, corruption, human rights abuses, and creeping (and sometimes galloping) authoritarianism in the world.

Yet for all of the ways in which the summit might fall short of our aspirations, there is no excuse for leaders, and especially leaders from the world’s most advanced and long-standing democracies, to treat the gathering as some sort of rote recitation of our democratic commitments.

The stakes for democracies are really, really high. In

other words, this is not a feel-good moment for indulging each other’s platitudes, but rather

for leaders to sound the alarm in personal, heartfelt, creative ways. And here I think the expectations for the summit are too low.

Even in its virtual format, even with some questionable participants, the summit can give all of us – the “transatlantic handwringers” (which I know sounds like the world’s most depressing cheerleading squad) – an opportunity to evaluate which leaders get it, and which do not.

Everyone will say nice things. But who will capture the urgency of the moment? Who will call out their fellow leaders for sleepwalking toward an existential political crisis? Who will dismiss as nonsense the idea of Europe choosing a “middle path” between the Chinese Communist Party’s vision for the world and their U.S.



ally's vision, no matter the current strains on U.S. democratic institutions? Who will reject with conviction and fresh arguments the siren call of illiberal populism? Who will recognize the need to act, not because the Americans have given a menu of opportunities for action, but because they see that we are on the edge of a cliff and far too many in Europe and the United States are urging us to drive over it and see whether the car will bounce? Who will acknowledge that the response to authoritarians who have taken advantage of political and civil rights, such as the freedoms of expression and association, should not be to constrain those liberties, but to stand together to defend them, and raise the costs for dictators' abuses?

Time will tell whether Biden's gathering achieves what he hoped for when he proposed the idea of a summit during his presidential campaign, but his sense of urgency remains compelling. With the perspective of half a century in the public sphere, and with much of that time spent engaged directly in foreign policy, Biden likes to say the world is at an inflection point and it's increasingly an open question whether democratic or authoritarian models will prevail.

***The relative decline of American power doesn't present an opportunity for Europe so much as it demands something new of it.***

Behind this inflection point lies another one: for the last 75 years, champions of democracy have depended, at the end of the day, on the guarantee of U.S. hard power. That era is ending. While the United States is hosting the summit, the event occurs at a moment when the United States alone can no longer credibly

deliver the extensive guarantees it once did. That doesn't mean the United States can't lead; it just means U.S. leadership has to

take new forms. And figuring out what that looks like – what new constellations of cooperation must emerge – is a challenge not just for the United States, but for its European partners as well. The relative decline of American power doesn't present an opportunity for Europe so much as it demands something new of it.

What I will be looking for as European leaders engage at the Summit for Democracy are those who see the threats clearly, who sound the alarm with conviction, and who are ready to lead in pushing back on illiberal and authoritarian forces in the world. The actions coming out of the summit may disappoint, but we can at least demand rhetoric that accurately reflects the stakes and matches the urgency of the perilous moment we're in.

## ***About the Author***

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Protesters rally for press freedom in Poland in August 2021. Source: Grand Warszawski / Shutterstock.com

## Slouching Toward Illiberalism: Why Democratic Backsliding is an Existential Dilemma for the European Union

*By Teresa Eder*

When President Biden convenes the Summit for Democracy in December – a signature conference he announced during his 2020 campaign – the delegations of European Union (EU) member states will represent the largest bloc of [participants](#). But one member of the EU will be notably absent: Hungary.

The choice to deny Hungary a coveted seat at the democracy table shouldn't come as a surprise. Prime Minister Victor Orbán's efforts to cement an "illiberal democracy" are well documented and fundamentally at odds with



the aspirations of Hungarian civil society. But the decision to exclude Hungary raises questions about the inclusion of other democracy delinquents such as Poland, which recently triggered another rule-of-law crisis for the EU.

Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party has tightened its grip on the country's Constitutional Tribunal, and the results are plain to see. In October, the tribunal challenged the superiority of EU law and the application of EU treaties in Poland. The judges also ruled that Article 2 (among other articles) of the Treaty on European Union, which requires "respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities," clashes with the Polish constitution. That ruling intensified tensions between Poland and the EU, and it also raised fundamental questions about the EU's mission to promote democracy.

The Polish government's brazen attempt to undermine the rule of law also highlights a larger point about the EU that many Europeans, and technocrats in Brussels, seem to have forgotten: The EU's ability to promote peace in Europe will only succeed if EU members vigorously defend the democratic values underpinning the union. With memories of Europe's great wars receding, it is all the more important to remind ourselves of Europe's shared history and fragility.

If Orbán's vision for "illiberal democracy" carries the day and inspires other would-be authoritarians

in Europe, the floodgates will open to a competition between a liberal Europe and an increasingly inward-looking, illiberal, and isolated Europe. Moreover, if

***That ruling intensified tensions between Poland and the EU, and it also raised fundamental questions about the EU's mission to promote democracy.***

EU members cannot uphold fundamental freedoms, they will deprive the EU of its source of power and legitimacy as a bastion

for rules-based international relations in an increasingly unruly world. Both trends – fragmentation in the EU and a loss of the EU's moral authority – present an existential dilemma for the EU that calls its purpose into question.

The Polish Constitutional Court's challenge to the supremacy of EU law was significant, but also part of a decades-long attempt by populist leaders to corrode the EU from within. Authoritarian populist parties in Europe often threaten to leave the union, but the reality is that such threats are a smokescreen for their more sinister motive: to remain in the EU and unravel its capacity to build consensus on fundamental issues. Anti-democratic politicians in various EU member states have learned from each other's playbooks, and often [team up](#) on democratic backsliding. It should come as no surprise that Marine Le Pen of France's National Front is in regular touch with Orbán and Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki to [forge new alliances](#) between far-right forces and boost her 2022 presidential campaign.

Some argue that populist, far-right forces in Europe will ultimately split over ideological differences, or



eventually lose national elections. But when it comes to protecting democratic values, the EU cannot afford to muddle through. The EU's crisis of democracy is not a mere technical matter or policy debate, such as the management of European bonds or the protection of personal data. All

European institutions must take a stand when authoritarian populists undermine the basic institutions

of democracy, from a free press to the independence of judicial systems. If there are no consequences, or accountability is delayed, the EU project is imperiled. Polish citizens might one day elect a more democratic government, but they will have to live with a court packed with PiS judges for years to come. Orbán speaks for many illiberal leaders in Europe when he says, "they can't get rid of us so easily."

## Road Ahead

The EU has no mechanism to expel a member. Worse, countries like Hungary and Poland have no appetite to leave, despite sharply divergent values. Instead, these governments have weaponized their membership to undermine the EU. For example, Poland and Hungary can protect each other from [Article 7](#), the EU's "nuclear option," and block the suspension of voting rights in the European Council. As long as prime ministers are permitted to draw EU funds, take credit for reforms made possible by those funds, and simultaneously vilify Brussels for domestic audiences, the EU's legitimacy and principles will suffer.

### ***All European institutions must take a stand when authoritarian populists undermine the basic institutions of democracy.***

Fortunately, the EU seems to recognize that it must mount a strong response to democratic backsliding within its ranks. Slowly, and far too late, the EU Commission is wielding its leverage – mainly financial – to address anti-democratic behavior. For example, it has

refused to disburse funds from the EU's COVID-19 recovery package to Poland, and slapped fines of 1 million euros per day

on Poland until a disciplinary chamber that punishes judges on political grounds is dismantled.

What is still lacking, however, is a coherent strategy on when and how to withhold funds in response to democratic backsliding. For example, Poland is under intense pressure from the reprehensible actions of the Alexander Lukashenko regime in Belarus, which has exploited migrant flows to its advantage. Yes, EU members should stand in solidarity with Poland, and provide tangible support. But that does not mean the EU should remain silent on questions of democracy or human rights in Poland, or succumb to blackmail when the Polish government threatens to block vital EU legislation, such as the [Fit for 55 package](#), in retaliation for EU actions in defense of the rule of law in Poland. The EU Commission should develop a clear roadmap that outlines how best to use its financial leverage to defend democratic norms and institutions.

To do so, the EU must shift its focus from technocratic regulatory details and focus on the heart of the matter: democratic values and fundamental freedoms. That should include support for civil society in countries



where leaders are eroding democratic protections. Why is it that no one demonstrates on the streets of Berlin, Paris, or Brussels when Poland introduces LGBTQI+-free zones, or when Hungary bans the Central European University, or when Slovenia refuses to fund its national news agency? The EU should support networking opportunities and training for civil society leaders. After all, a tenet of the EU is that the freedoms in all member states are interconnected.

In the arcane language of EU treaties, European officials have recognized the importance of democratic values. European citizens feel the same; a majority of respondents to a 2021 [survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations](#) said the EU should be a “beacon of democracy and human rights, prioritizing the rule of law and high democratic standards within its own ranks.”

Adam Bodnar fought for individual rights as the Polish ombudsman until April of this year. In his summary of [the crisis](#) of liberal democracy, he frames the stakes for a generation of Poles and other Europeans: “Elections still take place, but like in other countries in the region, it is now clear that democracy is not just about the holding of elections, but also about what happens before and after them.” He is right. Democracy is a complex and often fragile ecosystem that must be nurtured and protected. In Europe, the EU needs to use all of its policy tools to prevent further erosion of this historic, but vulnerable, experiment: that liberal democracy can serve as the binding agent of a multinational bloc, and that the rights of some are inextricably linked to the rights of all.

### **About the Author**

**Teresa Eder** is a program associate for the Wilson Center’s Global Europe Program. Previously, she worked as a producer for German Public Broadcasters ARD and ZDF, and as deputy head of the foreign desk for the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard* in Vienna.





Victims of government repression gather as International Criminal Court Chief Prosecutor Karim Khan visits Venezuela in October 2021. Source: Edglois Marys / Shutterstock.com

## Globalization and the Inter-American Agenda

*By Diego García-Sayán*

This year saw both advances and setbacks, and ends amid several uncertainties regarding core issues in the Western Hemisphere. Three fundamental issues stand out related to the aspiration of building a common inter-American agenda – a difficult and ambitious goal given centrifugal dynamics and a weakening of multilateralism.

The fundamental challenge is to design a joint agenda around critical issues such as democracy, the environment, human rights, and economic development. This is only possible if Latin America overcomes today's dramatic fragmentation, and then develops an effective, interactive agenda with the United States and other external actors.

Several fundamental issues stand out, including three that are especially relevant and should be addressed at the Ninth Summit of the Americas in 2022.



The first is upholding democracy amid the expansion and consolidation of authoritarianism. There is a global push against democratic values, including in the Americas, from predestined individuals, authoritarian schemes, and the weakening of the separation of powers. The COVID-19 pandemic and the global recession provide favorable conditions for simplistic, radical, and “enlightened” responses that diminish and crack democratic institutions.

Policies like the ones of Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela and Daniel Ortega of

Nicaragua are consistent with this democratic crisis. There are similar global trends, with the temptation of absolute power built up by Narendra Modi of India, the authoritarian governments of Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland and Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro’s repeated assaults on the separation of powers in Brazil, and democratic regression in several countries of sub-Saharan Africa, where limits to indefinite re-election are fading away.

The global anti-democratic threat is serious: the demolition of international standards and rules, caudillismo, the concentration of power in the executive branch, and the rejection of diversity and immigrants. This must be stopped. It is essential to reaffirm democratic principles and values, and not merely with empty words. Rather, it is vital to affirm fundamental principles and closely monitor threats to democracy.

For its part, Latin America has enormous capital from its own democratic transitions, and the Inter-American

Democratic Charter is a substantial tool that should not be a dead letter in the face of today’s threats.

The second challenge is Latin American regional fragmentation and the difficulty of integration. Alicia Bárcena, executive secretary of the UN’s Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), has said, “we must rescue the vision of an integrated Latin American market” to take advantage

of a region with 650 million people.

However, it is not only a question of international trade,

but rather regional coordination that could aim to build a more symmetrical interlocution with the United States, China, and Europe. A key issue in this context is the need for non-alignment in any sort of “Cold War” between the United States and China.

It is urgent that the Ninth Summit of the Americas contributes to designing strategies to address regional fragmentation and promote integration. In Latin America, intraregional multilateralism has been weakened, but the region maintains its participation in global multilateralism and frequently engages with Europe and others on important issues such as the environment and human rights.

Reactivating multilateralism substantially is essential for Latin America. But for this to occur, our countries must stop navel-gazing and really invest in relaunching regional and subregional integration mechanisms. These institutions are languishing, but they should play a role in reenergizing multilateralism. When it makes sense, this

***It is essential to reaffirm democratic principles and values, and not merely with empty words.***



effort should also interact with the United States and Europe, for instance, in promoting human rights and protecting the environment.

For this undertaking, it is vital, literally, to adopt a position of non-alignment. This is a region increasingly opened up to the world, but Latin American countries should not be inertially put in a position to choose “sides” between the United States or China, or become a battleground in that geopolitical competition. The U.S.-China rivalry is not our war.

The third challenge is to produce an extraordinary boost in investment and economic development. The uniquely and extraordinarily devastating impacts of the pandemic in Latin America require extraordinary responses. Economic development and the defeat of poverty in Latin America were always essential aspects of any regional agenda, and only more so now given the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rich countries have rolled out massive fiscal stimulus for themselves during the pandemic, including the United States under the Trump and Biden

administrations. In Europe, the largest European Union stimulus package ever is being implemented. In Latin America, by contrast, not only was there no similar fiscal injection, but most countries are struggling with unmanageable deficits. There is

no substantive discussion or decisions on the subject in international forums.

In this context, a strategy to manage and designate

***A strategy to manage and designate extraordinary global cooperation resources for Latin America and the Caribbean, similar to what was done in Europe with the Marshall Plan following World War II, is crucial.***

extraordinary global cooperation resources for Latin America and the Caribbean, similar to what was done in Europe with the Marshall Plan following World War II, is crucial. Global collaboration will be essential to assure post-pandemic consistent growth in the region.

Regional cooperation should be an important tool for improving our capacity for insertion and negotiation in the world. Only then will Latin America be able to catalyze sufficient support, including ambitious action from international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Banco de Desarrollo de America Latina (CAF).

## ***About the Author***

***Diego García-Sayán*** is a former foreign minister of Peru and a former judge on the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, for which he served as president for two terms.





President of Venezuela Nicolás Maduro (center) with First Lady Cilia Flores (left) and Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López (right). Source: [StringerAL / Shutterstock.com](#)

## Latin American Regional Organizations, International Democracy Assistance, and Democracy

*By Miriam Kornblith*

Latin America has an advanced system of regional organizations conceived to protect and foster democracy. This institutional architecture comprises the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Inter-American System, composed of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. A significant development was the approval of the Inter-American Democratic Charter in 2001. The question looming over these institutions and covenants is how effective have they been in defending and promoting democracy and human rights?



Despite this robust institutional framework, Latin America has experienced significant democratic erosion during the 21st century, in tandem with a global democratic recession, including Venezuela and Nicaragua becoming outright dictatorships. Despite courageous efforts from the OAS leadership and some committed governments, the OAS has not been able to deter autocratic governments from oppressing their own people, and democratic leaders have not been able to command a solid majoritarian coalition to condemn them. In this context, it would be easy to conclude that the effectiveness of the region's multilateral institutions has been limited.

However, institutions, covenants, and charters can play relevant roles in at least two spheres: Setting normative standards and principles that guide the actions of individuals, organizations, and societies, and providing a space where societal conflict and debate can be channeled in a peaceful, pluralistic, and accountable fashion. The existence of institutions that safeguard democracy and human rights – whether in a region such as Latin America or Europe, or globally – provide a measure of the deviation from norms that societies are experiencing, and also normative guidance and an institutional pathway to close that gap. When there is no regional consensus to address emboldened authoritarian actors and governments, regional bodies may not be effective in preventing or halting democratic decay. However, they still act as

***When there is no regional consensus to address emboldened authoritarian actors and governments, regional bodies may not be effective in preventing or halting democratic decay.***

the source of normative legitimacy for democracy and human rights, provide guidance and inspiration to committed players, and set the standards for what a region should aspire to.

The functioning of the OAS, the Inter-American System, and the application of the Inter-American Democratic Charter has been examined and critiqued

by experts and practitioners from different angles. One common criticism is their overly government-centered and state-centric architecture

and functioning, which affects their ability to protect and promote democracy and human rights. This is particularly relevant today, when significant portions of democratic erosion originates from the actions of elected governments that betray their democratic origins and turn into autocratic regimes.

Despite this limitation embedded in the design of the regional democracy bodies, civil society organizations in the region have approached their role from a proactive and normative stance. They have used the space that exists in these organizations and covenants to amplify civil society's voice. Civil society organizations have been a major force introducing and supporting cases of human rights violations before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. They have also partnered with similar organizations in other regions



to hold governments accountable, provide visibility to victims, and raise international awareness about violations of democracy and human rights.

The efforts of civil society to enforce democratic norms has been significantly aided by the support provided by international democratic assistance agencies, particularly those based in the United States, but not

exclusively. In general, Latin Americans have overestimated the role of governments

and undervalued autonomous players and civil society organizations, limiting their resources and institutional expression. However, after decades of democratic functioning and the expansion of democratic principles and practices in Latin America and globally, the role of independent civil organizations has become more salient, recognized, and legitimized.

Throughout the region, independent civil society organizations have become critical players, exposing

corruption, demanding government accountability and transparency, defending victims of human rights violations, advocating for free and fair elections, revealing networks of organized crime, promoting independent judicial and oversight bodies, drafting reforms to improve democratic governance, broadening the sphere of human rights to include excluded populations such as Afro-Latino, indigenous,

and LGBTI+ communities, raising awareness about environmental degradation, countering disinformation and misinformation, and learning from the functioning of other regional or international democracy and human right bodies.

The agenda of issues addressed by civil society organizations across the region is varied, important, and ever expanding.

This activism and innovation have helped sustain the underlying democratic

functioning and vitality of the region despite evident signs of erosion. Many of these themes have been included in rulings, decisions, initiatives, and summits at the OAS and in the Inter-American System.

International democracy assistance organizations have provided critical resources, connections, and international legitimacy to independent civil society

organizations.

This has allowed them to enrich and complement the work of regional bodies by upholding and

expanding democracy and human rights norms and standards. In the clearly authoritarian or dictatorial cases, international democracy assistance efforts may be the only support and lifeline to sustain courageous or persecuted individuals suffering from the abuses of their own governments and/or from malign actors such as organized crime groups that have unfortunately spread across the region.

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The Summit for Democracy is an occasion to ratify the need to forge a principled and normative-oriented commitment to strengthen, renew, and enforce democratic and human rights values globally, including in Latin America. It is also an opportunity to strengthen cooperation among democratic players and institutions, and a chance to commit to continue providing international support to democratic players,

such as democratic and pluralistic political parties and independent civil society organizations. This would help lend voice, visibility, and support to oppressed individuals and communities in Latin America and across the globe who are suffering from the abuses of governments or illegal actors, and build and strengthen democratic solidarity.

### ***About the Author***

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Young Kenyans march for peace before the 2013 general elections. Source: USAID

## Conclusion

### The Summit for Democracy and the Future of Wilsonianism

The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars was [chartered](#) by the U.S. Congress in 1968 as the official memorial to President Woodrow Wilson, with the mission to symbolize and strengthen the fruitful relation between the world of learning and the world of public affairs. It was in this spirit that the Center organized this series of essays on the global state of democracy, authored by a mix of scholars and practitioners, leading up to the Summit for Democracy being organized by the Biden administration.

The summit comes during a period of profound geopolitical change around the world, as authoritarian governments in Moscow and Beijing have grown increasingly assertive, international institutions have been weakened, and questions about the future of democracy have grown across much of the West. These trends



have coalesced into deepening uncertainties about the role of the United States in the world and, as recently declared by Walter Russell Mead in *Foreign Affairs*, “the end of the Wilsonian era.”

## Wilsonianism and its Discontents

While Wilson is generally remembered as the founder of a school of American foreign policy thought advocating for the spread of democracy, the scholar Tony Smith argues in his book *America’s Mission*

that multiple American presidents have sought to portray democracy promotion as the “central ambition of American foreign policy” since the Spanish-American War (1898). Recall, for example, President John F. Kennedy’s *inaugural declaration* that the United States “shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty.”

It would be difficult to argue with the success of this approach. Both during and after the Cold War, nations around the world grew to tacitly recognize the fundamental truth articulated in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, that “governments... deriv[e] their just powers from the consent of the governed.” Where authoritarian regimes previously ruled, such as in South Korea, Taiwan, and much of Central and Eastern Europe, political and economic liberalism have since flourished. Indeed, in September 1945, Ho Chi Minh (hardly a democrat himself) stood before a crowd of thousands in Hanoi’s Ba Dinh Square and began his declaration of

an independent Vietnam with the words, “All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among them are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Today, except for the most extreme regimes in the world, appeals by tyrants to the “divine right of kings,” a “mandate of heaven,” or a strongman’s version of the *Führerprinzip* are rarely invoked. Instead, even

***Even most authoritarian governments cynically cite democratic ideals as the foundation of their legitimacy.***

most authoritarian governments cynically cite democratic ideals as the foundation of their legitimacy. The

People’s Republic of China, for example, describes itself as a “*people’s democracy*” under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Russia continues to hold regular, and *deeply fraudulent*, elections to buttress the leadership of Vladimir Putin. And Iran maintains a complex and tightly controlled parliamentary system, albeit overseen by an unelected supreme leader.

Yet despite the broad, and often grudging, acceptance of democratic ideals as the sole basis for political legitimacy around the world, some scholars have noted that, despite soaring rhetoric, U.S. democracy promotion has historically been largely instrumental. Arman Grigoryan, for instance, *argues* that American presidents have promoted democracy only when it advanced the interests of the United States, what he describes as “selective Wilsonianism.” One need only recall multiple U.S. efforts during the Cold War to undermine democratically-elected governments that appeared to be sympathetic to the Soviet Union, Washington’s decisions not to support democratic



movements in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and U.S. support of anti-communist authoritarian regimes.

Recently, some experts have concluded that the fundamental objectives of Wilsonianism – especially an international order grounded in strong international laws and robust international institutions – has failed.

Meade, for example, [notes](#) that authoritarian regimes have sought to undermine international laws and institutions in the

belief that they threaten their domestic and international ambitions; that Russia and China have sought to expand their influence by protecting smaller authoritarian regimes, like Bashar al-Assad’s Syria, from direct action by the United States and its allies; and that emerging technologies are empowering authoritarian regimes to exert even greater control over the lives of their people while undermining, or at least influencing, democratic systems abroad.

Indeed, genuine democracy appears to be on the retreat around the world. As noted by Freedom House’s annual *Freedom in the World* analysis, global freedom has declined for 15 consecutive years. The report assesses that 38 percent of the global population lives in countries that are “Not Free” – the lowest point since 2006. Having downgraded India to “Partly Free” status, Freedom House assessed in 2021 that only 20 percent of the global population lives in a fully “Free” country, the lowest level since 1995.

***Others have argued that challenges to democratic values in America’s own political system undercut Washington’s ability to promote democracy abroad.***

Others have argued that challenges to democratic values in America’s own political system undercut Washington’s ability to promote democracy abroad. Many have pointed to the general [decline](#) in public faith in democracy and democratic institutions, and the riot at the Capitol on January 6 that many have described as an attempted insurrection, as undermining the credibility of U.S. efforts to promote democracy.

As [explained](#) by Liza Prendergast, vice president for strategy and technical leadership at Democracy

International, “The legacy of a U.S. president encouraging political violence to overturn a legitimate election resounds in the halls of power abroad, emboldening autocratic leaders such as Vladimir Putin in Russia, Mohammad bin Salman in Saudi Arabia, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Viktor Orbán in Hungary.” Some of America’s closest democratic allies [share](#) a similar sentiment, with French President Emmanuel Macron lamenting, “A universal idea, that of ‘one person, one vote,’ is undermined.”

With these challenges in mind, it is understandable why some view Wilsonianism as dead – or at least on life support. Indeed, these challenges to democracy around the world and Wilsonianism at home may drive some to question why the Biden administration decided to organize a Summit for Democracy in the first place.



## Why Wilson Still Matters

Despite these concerns, Wilsonianism is very much alive.

As Benjamin Denison convincingly notes in his review of Grigoryan’s argument about the “selective Wilsonianism” of U.S. foreign policy, questions about the motives for America’s historical democracy promotion are overblown.

As far back as Wilson himself, the United States

has supported democracy in the firm belief that it is in the U.S. interest to do so – not out of a blind ideological commitment.

Wilson’s vision, which was broadly adopted by large swaths of Anglo-American intellectual elites during the inter-war period and after World War II, viewed war as the product of authoritarianism, imperialism, and economic nationalism. It was these characteristics, Wilson believed, that allowed for the kind of secret alliances and military adventurism that bred major power competition, suspicion, and conflict.

Wilson’s solution was the promotion of democracy, self-determination, trade, and especially international laws and institutions designed to peacefully manage disputes between nations. His ultimate failure to achieve this vision, and the eruption of another world war a generation later, convinced post-war leaders of the need to establish a robust system of international laws, norms, and institutions. The Cold War further deepened the conviction among most American and Western European leaders of the importance of promoting political and economic liberalism.

The link between ideals and interests was perhaps most directly expressed by President George W. Bush in his second inaugural address, which declared that, “the survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.”

President Biden has drawn similar linkages between democratic ideals and national interests. His inaugural

### ***Wilsonianism is very much alive.***

address marked the defense of democracy as a primary mission of his

administration, and he later explained to NATO leaders and members of the G7, “I think we’re in a contest – not with China per se, but a contest with autocrats, autocratic governments around the world – as to whether or not democracies can compete with them in the rapidly changing 21st century.” For Biden, as with so many of his predecessors, the promotion of democracy is a moral imperative *and* an effective way to compete with authoritarian rivals of the United States.

Beyond the benefits conveyed by the spread of political and economic liberalism identified by Wilson and his interwar and postwar successors, the United States has several advantages over Russia and China that are rooted in its commitment to Wilsonian ideals. The preservation of a robust network of alliances around the world, a commitment to transparency and the rule of law, an open and innovative economy, and many other factors have driven countries around the world to look to Washington to balance the rise of authoritarian powers. This is why China has largely failed to translate its robust economic ties in the Indo-Pacific into greater political influence: most countries would much rather



partner with an open, democratic, and powerful United States than with a closed and authoritarian China. This is also why China and Russia have sought to undermine international institutions, international laws, and democratic processes abroad; both Beijing and Moscow recognize that liberalism is a threat to their ambitions, and complicates their efforts to bend the world to their will.

***President Biden has drawn similar linkages between democratic ideals and national interests.***

### **If We Can Keep It**

U.S. democracy promotion has historically ranged between the approaches of two of its presidents. John Quincy Adams eloquently defended his decision not to intervene in a Greek revolution:

“Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will [America’s] heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.”

By contrast, Wilson expressed a commitment to the active promotion of democracy during his address to Congress requesting that the United States declare war on Germany and enter World War I “for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples... [and] for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience. The world must be made safe for democracy.”

At a time when American power is increasingly challenged and questioned, it is only natural for Washington to return to its democratic foundations as

the ultimate source of the strength and vitality of the United States. Moreover, it is similarly natural for the

United States to see its democratic allies and partners as the most likely to help push back against aggressive and ambitious authoritarian powers that pose a mutual challenge to their interests and values.

This is not to say that the going will be easy. Indeed, as noted by Mathew Burrows and Robert Manning, “shared values between the United States and its closest allies are no guarantee of comity.” At best, the Summit for Democracy will catalyze a difficult series of negotiations on democracy promotion that will need to overcome, or at least sidestep, differences between the United States and its allies on issues as varied as climate policy, taxation, regulation, privacy, data management, and vaccine nationalism. Yet the differences between Washington and Paris on these issues pale in comparison to their disagreements with Beijing and Moscow, and the stakes may incentivize compromise.

Moreover, a commitment to democracy should not presuppose a shunning of nondemocratic countries that nevertheless share other interests and concerns with the United States. As it has historically, the United States will need to find ways to balance advocating for its values and advancing its interests when the two are in conflict. While we should not shy



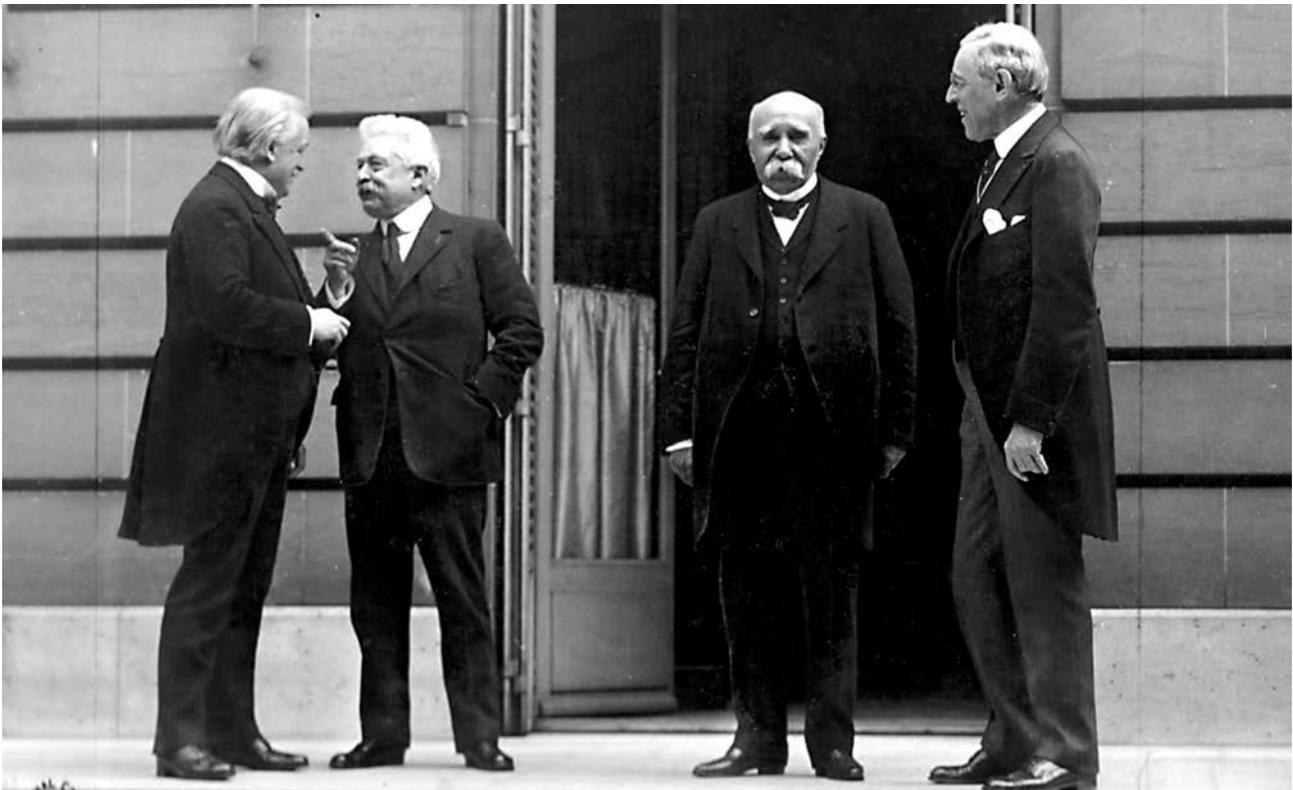
away from either, we should also recall that the former often bolsters the latter.

This Wilson Center collection of essays makes the case for the continued relevance of democracy as a driving force of international politics, and the universality of political and economic liberalism as the foundation of political legitimacy and the necessary ingredient for freedom and prosperity. Yet the obvious advantages they convey do not make their continued success inevitable. As previous generations have

found, preserving and advancing democratic ideals requires making difficult decisions, compromising and collaborating with like-minded allies, building new laws and institutions, and competing effectively with authoritarian adversaries.

To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, Wilsonianism will thrive only “if we can keep it.”

—**Abraham Denmark**, *Vice President of Programs, Director of Studies, Senior Adviser to the Asia Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*



The Council of Four from left to right: David Lloyd George, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, Georges Clemenceau, and Woodrow Wilson in Versailles. Source: [U.S. Signal Corps photo](#)



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