Confronting the Authoritarian Challenge

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I want to begin with a few thoughts about the title of both this session and our conference as a whole: "Confronting the Authoritarian Challenge." This brief phrase does not explicitly indicate *who* must confront this challenge. The answer to this question can be left unstated because it is taken for granted. Those facing this challenge are, of course, the world's liberal democracies.

The authoritarian challenge to liberal democracy has two key dimensions: It is in part a geopolitical or security threat, but it is also a competition in the realm of political principles, values, and ideas. While it is sometimes helpful analytically to treat these two dimensions separately, they are closely intertwined and their interrelationship should never be overlooked.

The key word in our title is "authoritarian," and it is worth briefly tracing how the meaning of this term has evolved. During the Cold War, the term "authoritarianism" was used most often in contrast with "totalitarianism." The eminent political scientist Juan Linz wrote an important 1975 book entitled *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*. The basic distinction Linz drew was between regimes like those of the communists and Nazis, which sought total control over all facets of social and political life, and regimes that were autocratic but were willing to leave their people some spheres of independent activity. President Reagan's UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick built upon this difference in a famous 1979 article, entitled "Democracy and Double Standards," that focused on the features separating traditional right-wing authoritarian regimes from revolutionary communist totalitarian regimes.

Since the end of the Cold War, however, the meaning of the term authoritarian has gradually been widened to encompass all forms of nondemocratic government. So today, even countries that once unquestionably would have been labeled as totalitarian are commonly referred to as authoritarian, a category that now embraces regimes as different as those of Singapore and North Korea. I should also mention here the word "autocratic," another label that is widely applied to nondemocratic regimes. As far as I can tell, there is no significant distinction in current

usage between the terms authoritarian and autocratic. The Biden administration, for example, seems to use autocracy and authoritarianism interchangeably in its speeches and documents.

Beginning with his inaugural address, President Biden has regularly invoked the opposition between democratic and autocratic (or authoritarian) countries. What is more, he has presented this divide as the critical fault-line of world politics and hence a key to U.S. foreign policy. One of the signature initiatives of his presidency has been the Democracy Summit, aimed at fostering cooperation among democracies and enhancing their solidarity in the competition with authoritarianism. In his opening statement to the first Democracy Summit in December 2021, Biden called the defense of democracy "the defining challenge of our time."

He reaffirmed this framing of the global struggle in his March 2022 Warsaw speech in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Biden spoke of "the great battle . . . between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force." Noting that "the forces of autocracy have revived all across the globe," he issued a call for "absolute unity . . . among the world's democracies."

The Biden administration so far has done an impressive job of maintaining democratic unity within NATO and among other U.S. allies. But it also has been discovering anew how difficult it is to maintain such unity on a global basis. As the Biden team learned in dealing with the invitation list during the run-up to the inaugural Democracy Summit, it is often difficult at the margin to determine which countries deserve to be included in the democratic camp. Efforts to create global democratic clubs have invariably been plagued by the question of their criteria for membership.

This problem had already been highlighted with the founding of the Community of Democracies in 2000. This intergovernmental organization, whose creation was spearheaded by U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Polish Foreign Minister Bronislaw Geremek, was launched with 106 countries approving its founding document, the Warsaw Declaration. Two decades later, the Community of Democracies has a permanent secretariat and continues to hold regular meetings, but its website, while naming the states that compose its Governing Council, does not list the

organization's full roster of member-states. In any case, the Community of Democracies is little known, and it is hard to discern any significant impact that it has had on international politics.

The problem of where to draw the boundaries for a club of democracies is not easily resolved. If one draws the lines strictly, it will lead to a group that is disproportionately Western and mostly European. But if one goes too far in the direction of flexibility, the body that results will include countries whose democratic credentials range from dubious to laughable, undermining its legitimacy and thus its capacity to make the case for democracy.

The principles that unite full-fledged or aspiring democracies are relatively clear. In his Warsaw speech President Biden cited "the rule of law; free and fair elections; the freedom to speak, to write, and to assemble; the freedom to worship as one chooses; freedom of the press." By contrast, it is not easy to identify the principles around which the authoritarians rally. If one looks at the 2001 charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, probably the leading body founded by autocracies, one can find language endorsing the UN Charter, international peace and security, and even human rights and fundamental freedoms. But it gives pride of place to "mutual respect of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of States and inviolability of State borders, non-aggression, [and] non-interference in internal affairs," a list of principles that its leading members conspicuously fail to heed in practice. Exhibit A is Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine.

Indeed, the bonds uniting the authoritarians at first seem somewhat mysterious. After all, the ideologies of the leading authoritarian states are wildly disparate—in Russia, a kind of updated Czarism backed by the Russian Orthodox Church; in China, rule by an atheistic Leninist party; in Iran, radical Shiite Islam; in Venezuela, twenty-first-century socialism; and in Saudi Arabia, traditional Sunni Islamic monarchy. Yet most of these countries have been increasing their levels of mutual collaboration, both by establishing new organizations and by working with one another in long-established intergovernmental agencies. This trend is sketched out in a 2016 *Journal of Democracy* book entitled *Authoritarianism Goes Global*.

To repeat, today's autocracies obviously are not united by joint allegiance to any universalist ideology. They are brought together instead by a common hostility to liberal democracy. In a

recent article former Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev referred to them as the "Antidemocracy International." They do not worry about external invasion by democratic powers. What scares them is the prospect that successful liberal democracy in their respective regions will offer an attractive model for their domestic opponents. Indeed, the rulers of the leading authoritarian powers have explicitly stated their concern that liberal democratic ideas will infect their societies and lead to internal efforts to overthrow their regimes.

I think it is wrong, however, to conclude that these regimes, because they do not subscribe to a common ideology, are not linked by shared notions of how governments should be run. This point was forcefully argued by Robert Kagan in his prescient 2008 book *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, in which he proclaimed that the world was heading to an era of "growing tensions and sometimes confrontation between the forces of democracy and the forces of autocracy."

In the immediate post-Cold War moment, my own view had been that liberal democracy could be successfully challenged only by a powerful alternative ideology, and apart from radical Islam no such ideology appeared to be on the horizon. Kagan contended, however, that "Chinese and Russian leaders are not just autocrats . . . They believe in autocracy." By this he meant not a modern-style mobilizational ideology, but a form of government with a long historical pedigree that emphasizes the importance of unified and centralized government, of order and stability, and of the strong rule at home that is needed for nations to be strong and well-respected internationally. "[The] global competition between democratic and autocratic governments," Kagan predicted, "will become a dominant feature of the twenty-fist-century world." And so far, at least, he seems to have been proven correct.

The real question is what form that competition will take. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there can no longer be any doubt that autocratic powers present a grave security challenge to the democratic world. There is an asymmetry here. In the rivalry between autocrats and democrats, the biggest threat to the authoritarians is in the realm of ideas. The biggest threat to the democracies, on the other hand, is in the military and security sphere. China, Russia, and Iran, the three most powerful authoritarian regimes, are also the most aggressive internationally, and they possess or (in the case of Iran) are seeking to acquire nuclear weapons.

The democracies have been slow to recognize the gravity of the security threat they face, but Putin's invasion of Ukraine has awakened them to the dangers ahead. To a considerable extent, they seem to have learned the lessons Putin has unwittingly taught them, and they seem prepared to increase their military spending and preparedness. It remains to be seen, however, how long these new attitudes will prevail, especially if the conflict in Ukraine turns into a protracted stalemate.

The brave Ukrainian resistance to Putin's invasion has inspired many people in the democratic world and has given them a sharper sense of what is at stake in responding to the authoritarian challenge. Ukrainians constantly affirm that they are not simply defending their native soil but are fighting to secure their right to govern themselves and to live in freedom. The geopolitical competition is at the same time a conflict over contending moral and political principles. As our colleague Ghia Nodia wrote in 2014 of the struggle for Ukraine's future direction that had already long been under way, "[one] cannot say where democracy promotion ends and geopolitics begins: They are inseparable."

This suggests that the foreign policy of the liberal democracies in confronting the authoritarian challenge needs to proceed both at the level of geopolitics and the level of ideas. For the most part, the defense of our security interests and the defense of democracy complement each other. But it must be acknowledged that there are sometimes serious tensions between them. These are most acute in our dealings with countries whose cooperation is needed for security reasons but who fail to measure up in terms of democracy. This is an old and familiar story. During the Cold War some called it the issue of "friendly tyrants."

Dealing with this issue can require unpleasant compromises. Nearly everyone accepts that in situations of dire jeopardy, where the survival of democracy itself is ultimately at stake, it may be necessary to swallow our revulsion at partnering with regimes that we abhor. The classic example is, of course, the World War II alliance between the democracies and Stalin's Soviet Union. As Winston Churchill famously put it, if Hitler invaded Hell, he would be ready to ally with the Devil.

But less extreme cases raise thornier questions. My guess is that in the coming years a number of these will center upon India, which is increasingly viewed as a backsliding or illiberal democracy. Yet because of its size and its key location in the Indo-Pacific, it is widely regarded as an essential partner in the effort to counter authoritarian China. India was a participant at the Democracy Summit, and it is hard to imagine that it will be excluded from future global democracy initiatives, or that excluding it would serve the long-term goal of advancing democracy.

So confronting the authoritarian challenge will demand from the liberal democracies not only firmness and resolve, but also nimble diplomacy and an intelligent assessment of the inevitable tradeoffs that defending democracy entails.