

The case for a league of democracies

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With tensions between Russia and Georgia rising, Chinese nationalism growing in response to condemnation of Beijing's crackdown on Tibet, the dictators of cyclone-ravaged Burma [resisting international aid](#), the crisis in Darfur still raging, the Iranian nuclear programme still burgeoning and Robert Mugabe still clinging violently to rule in Zimbabwe – what do you suppose keeps some foreign policy columnists up at night? It is the idea of a new international organisation, a league or concert of democratic nations.

“Dangerous,” [warns a columnist on this page](#), fretting about a new cold war. Nor is he alone. On both sides of the Atlantic the idea – set forth most prominently by Senator John McCain a year ago – has been treated as impractical and incendiary. Perhaps a few observations can still this rising chorus of alarm.

The idea of a concert of democracies originated not with Republicans but with US Democrats and liberal internationalists. Madeleine Albright, former secretary of state, tried to launch such an organisation in the 1990s. More recently it is the brainchild of Ivo Daalder, a foreign policy expert and senior adviser to Barack Obama. It has also been promoted by Anne-Marie Slaughter, dean of the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton university, and professor John Ikenberry, the renowned liberal internationalist theorist. It has backers in Europe, too, such as Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Danish prime minister, who recently proposed his own vision of an “alliance of democracies”. The fact that Mr McCain has championed the idea might tell us something about his broad-mindedness. But Europeans should not reach for their revolvers just because the Republican candidate said it first.

American liberal internationalists like the idea because its purpose is to promote liberal internationalism. Mr Ikenberry believes a concert of democracies can help re-anchor the US in an internationalist framework. Mr Daalder believes it will enhance the influence that America's democratic allies wield in Washington. So does Mr McCain, who in a recent speech talked about the need for the US not only to listen to its allies but to be willing to be persuaded by them.

A league of democracies would also promote liberal ideals in international relations. The democratic community supports the evolving legal principle known as “the responsibility to protect”, which holds leaders to account for the treatment of their people. Bernard Kouchner, the French foreign minister, has suggested it could be applied to Burma if the generals persist in refusing international aid to their dying people. That idea was summarily rejected at the United Nations, where other humanitarian interventions – in Darfur today or in Kosovo a few years ago – have also met resistance.

So would a concert of democracies supplant the UN? Of course not, any more than the Group of Eight leading industrialised nations or any number of other international organisations supplant it. But the world's democracies could make common cause to act in humanitarian crises when the UN Security Council cannot reach unanimity. If people find that prospect unsettling, then they should seek the disbandment of Nato and the European Union and other regional organisations which not only can but, in the case of Kosovo, have taken collective action in crises when the Security Council was deadlocked. The difference is that the league of democracies would not be limited to Europeans and Americans but would include the world's other great democracies, such as India, Brazil, Japan and Australia, and would have even greater legitimacy.

Some Europeans say it is precisely this global aspect that worries them, because it diminishes the centrality of Europe. The same fears make Europeans hesitant about expanding the Security Council to include Japan, India and Brazil. But this is short-sighted. New institutions should

reflect global realities. The more democratic solidarity there is in the world, the more influential democratic Europe will be.

Some critics complain that it is too hard to decide which nations are democracies and which are not. This is an especially odd objection coming from anyone in the EU, the most exclusive club of democracies in the world. When Europeans consider whether to admit a new member they do not shrug their shoulders and ruminate on the hopelessly complex meaning of the term "democracy". They employ precise and stringent criteria for deciding whether a possible entrant is or is not a democracy. A new league of democracies could simply borrow the EU's admissions form.

Will the mere fact of democracies working together produce a new cold war? That is unduly alarmist. But ideological competition is already under way. Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, notes that: "For the first time in many years, a real competitive environment has emerged on the market of ideas" between different "value systems and development models". The good news, he believes, is that "the west is losing its monopoly on the globalisation process". True or not, democracies should not be embarrassed about holding up their side of this competition. Neither Beijing nor Moscow would expect them to do anything else.

Here is a final reason not to worry about a league of democracies. It will not come into being unless the world's great democracies want it to. This is one idea that the US cannot impose.

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