



Renewing our Democratic Alliance

## **Advancing a Network for Democratic Solidarity**

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### **I) Context for idea of Network of Democratic Solidarity**

Democratic solidarity is at the core of what drives the response of Europeans, the US, Canada and a number of like-minded states from Asia (chiefly Australia, Japan & South Korea) to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is driven by empathy with a fellow democracy whose citizens have been brutally assaulted by a war of aggression that seeks to eliminate Ukraine as a sovereign state. Through his eloquent speeches Ukrainian president Zelensky has very effectively appealed to this sentiment of solidarity and captured many hearts and minds of many citizens in fellow democracies. US President Biden has talked about Russia's war using the democracy vs autocracy frame that informs much of his foreign policy rhetoric. Not only have democracies in Europe, North America and partly in Asia supplied Ukraine with weapons. They have also demonstrated they are willing to make (limited but still significant) sacrifices in pursuit of democratic solidarity with Ukraine in terms of implementing sanctions that impose sizeable economic costs also on those doing the sanctioning. In addition, Europeans have been welcoming to Ukrainian refugees. Besides security interests in great power conflict with Russia and the defense of international law democratic solidarity is a key motivating force for the response of the G7 and fellow travelers. Quite a few in the "West" have been in a self-congratulatory mood. A former German foreign minister gave a dinner speech recently in which he praised the revival of the transatlantic alliance and the comeback of the West.

If you step outside the Western bubble, however, things look very different. Nobody has been waiting for a revival of the West. Where Europe and US see democratic solidarity & standing up for international law, many outside the West see double standards. They point to Western breaches of international law in Iraq and Kosovo. They decry the fact that Ukrainian war refugees get preferential treatment because they are white and not Muslims. When they hear "Westerners" wax poetically about defending the "liberal international order" or the "rules-based order" they ask "whose rules? And to whose benefit?" pointing to injustice and inequity inherent in current order that has also been exposed by the pandemic.

Many resent unilateral Western sanctions that have not been approved by the UN Security Council. They point to the fact that sanctions have negative effects on third countries. The Chinese and Russian narrative that it is the West's fueling the conflict and the effects of the sanctions that are causing havoc in global markets endangering food security for billions and putting affordable energy out of reach of many poorer countries. Few buy into the clean "democracy vs autocracy" lens that Biden is pushing. They see power interests on the part of NATO members at work that are said to be partly responsible for the conflict.

Many outside the West also resent the fact that Europeans expect the whole world to single-mindedly focus on the Ukraine war that they claim will decide on the future of the global order. (At least that is what EU Commission President von der Leyen claimed in a recent speech in Delhi). They

find this a rather solipsistic European-centric view of the world. Many other regions have experienced major conflicts recently so the single-minded concentration on Russia's war seems out of place in the eyes of many. Even those in the Global South, like Kenya, who have eloquently spoken out against Putin's imperialism quickly got exhausted from the Western envoys trying to get them to make this point over and over again. Kenya made it clear it has other issues to focus on including the fall-out of the war on global food security and energy prices. Many have also made it clear that they wish the West had focused more on their own problems when they needed solidarity.

German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock has been one of the Western politicians to clearly acknowledge this in her speech to the UN General Assembly in early March after the start of Russia's invasion. She said:

"I have heard some of my colleagues say, when I was speaking on the phone around the world in the last days: "You are calling on us to show solidarity for Europe. But where have you been for us in the past?" And frankly speaking, I am telling you: I hear you. We hear you. And I truly believe we should always be willing to critically question our own actions, our past engagements in the world. I am willing to do so."<sup>1</sup>

Wolfgang Schmidt, head of the German chancellery, argued that there is a risk we end up with a "G7 vs BRICS+ world" which he calls a "stupid" outcome we should work hard to avoid using lots of diplomacy and concrete action on food security and energy prices.<sup>2</sup>

In a similar self-reflective vein, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau has pointed to the need for democracies to do their homework. In a speech in Berlin in March 2022, Trudeau said that "at its best, democracy is always stronger than authoritarianism. But if we're going to be honest with each other, democracy hasn't exactly been at its best these past few years. Even as we're fighting Putin's invasion, we need to recommit ourselves to the work of strengthening our democracies".<sup>3</sup>

Democracies can advance this in a process of mutual learning with pro-democracy actors from around the world. At the same time, they can and should show solidarity with and learn from pro-democracy actors advancing universal rights and the rule of law in often very difficult circumstances globally. Similar to Trudeau's assessment of democracy, it is possible to state that multilateralism has not been at its best over the past decade. Democratic middle powers have a particular stake in the health of multilateralism for unlike great powers they do not fare well in a "might is right" environment. They have a strong incentive to invest in multilateral institutions since they generally see them as serving their interests. That interest they share with smaller states. On the other hand, middle powers also have significant ability to invest in multilateralism, an ability that is stronger than that of smaller governments. They can do agenda-setting, start new initiatives, defend rules and laws against attacks, mobilize support for global public goods. Middle powers have a particular responsibility to invest in strengthening multilateralism from which they have profited over the past decades. Again, this investment starts at home by among other things defending against domestic nationalist backlash against multilateralism that is gaining ground in many democracies.

It is in this spirit of self-reflection as well as commitment to action that we should advance the idea of creating a Network of Democratic Solidarity. Canada and Germany as two chief champions of multilateralism among the G7 could and should lead the way on this alongside like-minded democratic middle powers from Asia, Africa & Latin America.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://new-york-un.diplo.de/un-en/news-corner/-/2515120>

<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/thorstenbenner/status/1527003708487344131?s=20&t=y1DAElmzpcOJHhuXdgoXEA>

<sup>3</sup> <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/speeches/2022/03/09/prime-ministers-remarks-international-security-event-berlin>

## II) Learning from previous initiatives

A Network for Democratic Solidarity would do well to learn from the strengths and weaknesses of comparable initiatives.

The *Community of Democracies* established in 2000 has pursued laudable goals but has lacked strong impact maybe partly because of its unwieldy bureaucracy-heavy intergovernmental set-up that quickly became “ritualized” according to some of those involved.

The *Alliance for Multilateralism* is an initiative launched by Germany in 2018 in close cooperation with Canada and France. The alliance pursues a threefold agenda: to protect international institutions and norms where they are under pressure; to pursue a more assertive and proactive agenda in policy areas that lack effective governance and where new challenges require collective action; and to reform and upgrade existing institutions to make them more inclusive and effective.

The alliance is one answer for countries committed to multilateralism to safeguard their interests in a new political environment where multilateralism is squeezed in between the reemergence of great power competition and a sovereigntist-nationalist backlash in many countries. The Alliance developed significant traction during the Trump years and early during the Covid pandemic but has since lost momentum somewhat. That may partly be true to the fact that it did not have that much civil society buy-in that would carry the initiative even as participating governments got distracted. The alliance also never lived up to its promise of serving as democratic solidarity mechanism in the face of authoritarian coercion efforts (such as the Kovrig/Spavor hostage taking by China). Still, the alliance offers a partial basis on which to advance the Network for Democratic Solidarity that would have a stronger non-governmental grounding in addition the governmental track.

The *Summit for Democracy* is a signature initiative of US President Joe Biden. The first summit took place in December 2011. The strength of the initiative is the strong focus on anti-corruption efforts. A weakness is heads of state format. This has led to impression that the US (itself a highly imperfect democracy in its present state) is in the business of determining which state qualifies as a democracy getting an invite to the summit. The discussion on who is in and who is out dominated much of the public debate in the lead-up to the summit which could have been avoided by simply inviting pro-democracy actors from across the world, also from non-democracies. Another weakness is the fact that this effort is very much tied to Biden’s presidency and unlikely to survive a transition to a different president.

The *Human Security Network* founded by 11 states in 1999 had a strong link to civil society. Some of the lessons learned will be discussed at Tuesday’s session by leading Canadian protagonists and should very much inform how we go about a Network for Democratic Solidarity.

## III) Principles

*Democratic solidarity* as key concept is more meaningful and concrete than a nominal focus on just multilateralism. It is evocative and clearly points to a core of pro-democracy actors supporting one another and learning from one another.

The network should be flexible and pragmatic in terms of its set-up and operations. Unlike the Community of Democracies there should not aspire to be an intergovernmental bureaucracy created for the network. The network should see itself as a generator of ideas, hub for advocacy and catalyst

for action. There should be an interlocking of civil society and government actors and tracks. That means government actors as well as civil society actors will be at the heart of the network. The network should also see itself as a complementary “open docking base” pragmatically using other fora and formats to push issue-specific efforts through new initiatives and more coordinated action.

It should be inclusive on all counts including geography which means there should be major participation by pro-democracy actors from the Global South. That also means that in addition to Canadian and German government and civil society actors there have to be a number of core members from outside the “West” to get the network off the ground. Making the network inclusive also means that unlike with Summit for Democracy there is no exclusive list of participating countries but rather an open invitation to all pro-democracy actors including pro-democracy actors from non-democracies.

Since government attention is fickle especially in times of foreign policy crises like the Ukraine invasion a constant stream of civil society organized work involving government actors in flexible formats is best to get the network off the ground and sustain it. In terms of initial buy-in it would be important to have top level public support from the Canadian and German governments as well as a number of governments from democracies outside the Euro-Atlantic space.

The network should operate on two interlocking tracks advancing ideas and action: the first a steady stream of research, reflection and advocacy by civil society actors, the second interaction by policymakers that involves civil society actors.

#### **IV) Areas for reflection and action**

The purpose here is not to compile a comprehensive list of potential policy areas of focus but rather to sketch in which circles a Network for Democratic Solidarity can make a difference.

Activities in a first circle concern fora with like-minded democracies. Here a first goal should be to invest in credibility. Any country to a credible player in terms of working on and with democracies abroad it needs to work on shoring up democracy at home (and to increase support for multilateral action within the public). In the words of Carnegie Endowment scholar Thomas Carothers, “complete humility and serious honesty about our shortcomings” should be key prerequisites on Biden’s democracy agenda on the international stage. That also applies to other democracies. Countries can also only be credible if they stand up for democracy in organizations in which the domestic rule of law is a key prerequisite for membership such as the European Union or NATO. Another aspect of credibility is for democracies to go after transnational networks of corruption that enable authoritarianism. Financial and property markets in democracies are all too often safe havens for kleptocrats, with bankers, lawyers, PR agencies and other professional elites in democracies profiting. In this context, the Network for Democratic Solidarity can facilitate mutual learning on how different countries and different civil society actors deal with challenges to democracy.

A second key principle should be mutual support. There should be a solidarity mechanism of democratic countries looking out for one another in the face of political and economic coercion from authoritarian countries. Germany for example stood alone when put in the diplomatic freezer by Saudi-Arabia restricting political and economic ties after then foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel criticized Riyadh for its “adventurism”. A year later, Canada faced the same after its foreign minister Chrystia Freeland called out the Saudi government for arresting activists. Both countries would have fared better (and the Saudi government distracted) if there had been mutual solidarity. This mechanism should also apply in the face of Beijing’s political and economic coercion. One example is

Beijing's hostage diplomacy where there should have been more solidarity with Canadian hostages Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor early on.

A second circle comprises (near) universal membership UN bodies. Democratic middle powers need to lead the effort to strengthen and reform multilateral bodies with (near) universal membership. All democratic middle powers that would lead Network for Democratic Solidarity need to put their money where their mouth is and increase the predictability of funding for the UN system. As champions of multilateralism, democratic middle powers should proudly be the first line to pay their contributions to UN on time while others are often dragging their feet. If you are a champion of multilateralism, you should increase predictability of funding for UN agencies by increasing share of core budget compared to discretionary funding for specific activities. And if you are a champion of multilateralism, you should channel more of your funding supporting goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through multilateral rather than bilateral channels. Democratic middle powers could support the Funding Compact as a mechanism that combines commitments on the part of member states for better funding with commitments on the part of UN agencies for better transparency, accountability and effectiveness.<sup>4</sup> The reason for this is simple: UN system can only be an effective forum for diplomacy and effective implementer of commonly agreed goals if it is properly funded and better run. At the same time, democratic middle powers should better coordinate to protect universal human rights, also in UN bodies where human rights abusers stand together & try to win over third countries (such as China trying to shield itself against criticism of its treatment of minorities or Saudi-Arabia seeking to justify its human rights record). Nicole Deitelhoff rightly argues that "a key characteristic of the present crisis is not the lack of multilateral rules but that fewer and fewer states feel bound by them", such as is the case in international humanitarian law (IHL). Pro-democracy actors should reinforce cooperation to push back against violations of IHL.

Pro-democracy actors organized in Network for Democratic Solidarity should also push back against efforts by Beijing and others to reinterpret universal human rights norms. The Network for Democratic Solidarity can organize a much-needed exchange of lessons learned on how to best go about this. The Network should also advance reconfiguring international bodies to make them more balanced giving candidates from Global South greater voice.

Third circle is global institutions providing global public goods. This is not a primary area for work of Network for Democratic Solidarity. But it is important to stress that on the one hand democracies do need to demonstrate that are at forefront of efforts to provide global public goods (be it on climate or public health). They also need to engage and cooperate with non-democratic players on these issues. A Network for Democratic Solidarity can work on principles for engagement with authoritarian actors on global public goods.

In a recent piece German chancellor Olaf Scholz has detailed why he believes democracy will prevail in global systems competition with authoritarian state capitalism.<sup>5</sup> A Network for Democratic Solidarity can help to ensure that Scholz' conviction becomes reality.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/governments-un-finalize-funding-compact-for-sdgs/>

<sup>5</sup> [Scholz's address](#)