

An International Organization for Democracies? Accreditation versus a “League”*

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July 15, 2009

1. Introduction: A league of democracies?

In the July/August 2008 issue of *Foreign Policy*, Thomas Carothers mounted a vigorous and sometimes devastating attack on a U.S. foreign policy pundit idea *du jour* – the idea that the next U.S. administration should seek to form a new international organization for democracies only. As Carothers and others noted at the time, an interesting aspect of this proposal was the political and intellectual diversity of its supporters. They ranged from Democrats to Republicans and from neoconservatives to their critics.¹ Some supported the idea because they believed that the U.S. shares more security interests with other democracies – such as an interest in humanitarian intervention – and could more reliably and legitimately act on these interests in an organization in which they are not blocked by authoritarian states.² A league of

*Thanks to Alan Alexandroff, Robert Axelrod, Patricia Goff, and Steven Krasner for helpful comments.

¹ Democrats: Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, “Democracies of the World, Unite!” *The American Interest* (November-December 2006). Republicans: Presidential candidate John McCain. Neoconservatives: Robert Kagan, Charles Krauthammer, David Brooks (who has many neocon moments). Critiques of neoconservatives, albeit liberal interventionists: Ann Marie Slaughter and John Ikenberry, “Forging a World of Liberty under Law: U.S. National Security in the 21st Century,” Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, 2007. A Democrat and a Neoconservative team up in Ivo Daalder and Robert Kagan, “The Next Intervention,” *The Washington Post*, 6 August 2007, A17.

² Daalder and Lindsay, Slaughter and Ikenberry.

democracies was also seen as a way to stimulate meaningful reform in an outmoded, sclerotic UN system, or to bypass or undermine the U.N. entirely.³

Carothers derided these proposals for their “remarkable tone deafness to the international mood,” their “almost willful obliviousness to how such an idea would be perceived and received outside the United States.” He argued that the world, including most democracies, would view this as a thinly veiled effort to gain multilateral cover for U.S. unilateralism and interventionism, which has an especially bad reputation as a result of Bush administration foreign policy. He pointed out that while various constituencies in the U.S. may view the U.N. as a big problem, many abroad see the Security Council’s refusal to ratify the Iraq invasion as one of its proudest moments. He argued that democracies in fact have diverse interests and would be unlikely to toe the U.S. line in a new organization, and that in any event most of the major foreign policy problems the U.S. faces today require dealing with autocracies that would be excluded.⁴ Finally, he believes that the U.S. would inevitably manipulate entry rules to exclude democracies it doesn’t like, making the whole thing a hypocritical sham.

Carothers’ attack on the idea of a League of Democracies was followed by similarly spirited critiques from Stephen Stedman, in a policy brief for the Stanley Foundation, and from Charles Kupchan in *Foreign Affairs*.⁵ Both Stedman and Kupchan stressed the point that major power democracies need the cooperation of powerful

³ Everyone, with the emphasis on “killing the UN” from Krauthammer and to a slightly less degree, Brooks.

⁴ Carothers makes the latter point not in the *Foreign Policy* article but in a panel discussion with Ivo Daalder and Tod Lindberg at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on May 29, 2008. See <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/events/index.cfm?fa=eventDetail&id=1137>.

⁵ Stephen J. Stedman, “America and International Cooperation: What Role for a League of Democracies?” Policy Analysis Brief, The Stanley Foundation, November 2008. See also Bruce Jones, Carlos Pascual, and Stephen J. Stedman, *Power and Responsibility* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2008), chapter 3. Charles Kupchan, “Minor League, Major Problems: The Case against a League of Democracies,” *Foreign Affairs* November/December 2008.

autocracies to make progress on a number of major international problems (for instance, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and global warming). They fear that a League would antagonize China, Russia, and other nondemocracies, for no good reason since they do not think that the democracies would be more likely to be able to cooperate effectively on their own, or more than they already do.⁶ Stedman argued further that existing international institutions are not as broken as proponents of a League presume, and that where they are hamstrung a better “force multiplier” would be a G-16 institution that includes rising major powers, democratic or not. Kupchan prefers bringing rising powers onto the Security Council, or a G-6 concert of great powers (add China and India to the G-8, drop Canada, consolidate the EU as a single member).

Carothers, Stedman, and Kupchan all make the strong point that outside of some neoconservatives and liberal interventionist writers in the U.S., the idea of a League of Democracies inspires indifference or antipathy around the world. Indeed, even the European major power democracies are said to be hostile. This is taken as a leading example of how the Iraq war and Bush administration style and substance have poisoned the well for democracy promotion efforts. As an idea for a major foreign policy initiative, the idea of League of Democracies appears to be a dead horse. Certainly the Obama administration will not be taking it up. Indeed, so far the new president seems to have almost gone out of his way to signal that his administration is not interested in pushing democracy or democratization as a foreign policy priority, let alone in founding a new organization for democracies.⁷

⁶ See also Paul J. Saunders, “Not the Way to Intervene,” *Washington Post*, August 13 2007, A11.

⁷ There is no deputy-level democracy portfolio on the National Security Council anymore. In his June 4, 2009, speech in Cairo, President Obama only briefly raised the subject of democracy, making it clear that he viewed it as human right and universal aspiration, but that “No system of government can or should be

In the public debate in 2007 and 2008, both “left” and “right” advocates of a League or Concert mainly conceived of it as an organization that could more easily ratify military interventions for humanitarian or other purposes – an alternative to the United Nations Security Council. If this is the conception, then I agree with the critics’ negative assessment. I will argue, however, that differently formulated, there are still good reasons to take the idea of an international organization of democracies seriously as an institutional response to some of the most important 21st century international security challenges. While the current international political mood – and the Obama administration’s strategy for restoring international respect for, and trust in, U.S. foreign policy – may not permit it now, in the medium or longer run it is both viable and desirable.

In the long run, it is difficult to imagine how the threats posed by nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons and the spread of these technologies can be reliably addressed *except* in a world of economically prosperous, stable, and democratic governments. It follows that democracy promotion – and democracy maintenance – will continue to be important U.S. foreign policy goals that we will share with other democracies.

Rather than being an alternative UNSC or a democratic G8 or G16 or the like, a better conception for an international organization of democracies would be as an accreditation organization, or a meritocratic club with high and objective standards for admission. Members of the club would commit themselves to periodic review of their

imposed by one nation on another.” Obama has pointedly said that democracy is not a core objective of U.S. policy on Afghanistan, and has never stressed democracy as a core goal in Iraq. And this despite the presence of League supporters Anne-Marie Slaughter in the State Department (Director of Policy Planning) and Ivo Daalder as U.S. Ambassador to NATO.

democratic institutions and process by a committee of experts charged with evaluating these against a set of standards laid out in the organization's charter. Member state governments would nominate the experts for fixed terms according to rules designed to minimize partiality – for example, no nominations of own-state nationals, a two-thirds vote to approve any expert, experts do not participate in reviews of their home country, and closed-door proceedings.

The somewhat moribund Community of Democracies (CD), an intergovernmental organization founded in 2000, could play this role if its governance structure and standards and procedures for deciding membership were significantly reformed. In its current incarnation, the structure and practices of the CD reflect ambivalence about whether the organization is supposed to be a meritocratic club, or a support group that brings along “democratic aspirants.” Alternatively, if reform of the CD is not feasible, a new organization could be founded, starting with a small group of democracies that would commit themselves to arms-length review of their electoral practices.

At least initially, the idea would be an organization with parallels to the way that the IMF works, or to a bond-rating agency (in theory, if not in recent practice). States could realize a variety of benefits from an arms-length certification of their democratic credentials, including prestige, international backing for domestic supporters of genuine democracy, and a reputation that could help in international diplomatic and even financial dealings. In turn, these benefits would help stimulate democratic reform and consolidation in aspiring and new members.

The organization would *not* have a mandate to pronounce or act on international disputes or other matters. But to the extent that it could establish a credible, relatively

objective membership and renewal process, it might naturally acquire some authority and legitimacy over time. Carother's concern that a League of Democracies created by and for Washington's purposes would have no legitimacy or authority is valid. If the U.S. wants to develop effective and legitimate multilateral institutions to better address 21st century security and other threats, it will have to tie its own hands in these institutions to a significant degree.⁸

In what follows I will return to this specific proposal by way of a more sweeping discussion. The next section considers the purposes that an international organization devoted to international security affairs should serve in an era characterized by nuclear weapons and many poor, fragile, and often authoritarian states. The third section discusses what sort of international institutions would be useful in light of these problems, concluding that however they are precisely configured, they will be far more effective – and there will be less need for them to be powerful – in a world of stable, reasonably prosperous democracies. The fourth section argues that democracy promotion, or human rights promotion, by military intervention tends to exacerbate the problem of WMD proliferation in the short- and medium-run, so that a better approach is to provide stronger international incentives for states to become and stay genuinely democratic on their own. The fifth section returns to the idea for an international organization of democracies outlined above, discussing the travails of the Community of Democracies and what these tell us.

⁸ G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

2. What problems do we want an international organization focused on international security affairs to solve?

In the bad old days of great power conflict and war, this was an easy question to answer. The United Nations, the League of Nations, and previous schemes for perpetual peace were all centrally concerned with averting great power war.

But this is probably no longer the case. We no longer need an international organization for this purpose, because nuclear weapons (and secondarily, or less securely, international trade and the spread of democracy) have rendered great power war to capture an adversary's capitol city essentially unthinkable.

It is hard to overemphasize how much that possibility drove international politics in the prenuclear era. From Richelieu to Molotov, rulers and diplomats were fixated on alliances and coalitions in the event of great power war. Such international politics are gone now. There are vague alignments of like-minded states, or states that have some common interest on particular international issues. But we do not see the traditional defensive or offensive military pacts intended to deter attack by adversaries or to make conquering another state or coalition easier. What point would they have in a world where an economically and technologically advanced state can, if it needs to, reliably protect itself from invasion and territorial conquest by building nuclear weapons?

The view expressed in the last paragraph is commonly taken to be an attack on the Realist school of thought in the field of International Relations, many of whose advocates still repeat the mantra that as long as there is no world government, international politics must remain a dog-eat-dog struggle among the great powers. This is anachronistic

thinking. Most self-described Realists are failing to think through the very Realist implications of the nuclear revolution for great power politics.⁹

Even in the era of great power war, it may never have been possible to devise an international institution that could have reliably avoided it. Because great power wars have been horrendous events, it is hugely fortunate that the traditional reason for trying to construct an international institution to foster international peace and security is now moot.¹⁰

Nonetheless, the main cure for great power war can have some extremely serious side effects. The spread of nuclear weapons raises the risk of nuclear use through brinkmanship in an international crisis; preemptive attacks prior to the acquisition of secure second-strike forces in a contentious dyad; unauthorized or accidental detonation; and acquisition and use by terrorist groups. Any of these can be major security threats for both major and minor powers. And due to the effects of fallout, nuclear detonation threatens many more states than those directly involved in a conflict.

Several of these threats are amplified in a world of fragile, bureaucratically weak states, among them secretive dictatorships. Dictatorships and states in the throes of a political transition are at greater risk of collapse into anarchy, which puts at great risk the control of nuclear weapons or nuclear materials. Further, nondemocratic governments

⁹ Arthur Lee Burns was one of the first to figure this out; see his “From Balance to Deterrence,” *World Politics* 9, 4 (July 1957), 494-529. The point was obscured somewhat during the Cold War by the importance of NATO. NATO, however, served multiple and important ends beyond simple deterrence of a Soviet threat; it was also about constraining and reassuring West Germany and thus reassuring the leaders of the USSR, who were extremely worried about the possibility of a nuclear-armed Germany (Marc Trachtenberg, *The Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999)). In addition, it took time for these states to figure out the consequences of the absolute weapon.

¹⁰ On the “obsolescence” of major power war, see John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday* (New York: Basic Books, 1989) and *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); and Richard Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

tend to greater secrecy as a result of strategies to prevent mobilization to overthrow the regime. Greater secrecy in turn exacerbates “security dilemmas” with other states, raising the risk of nuclear use out of preemptive war.¹¹

For “security threats” understood in the traditional sense of violence or coercion from foreign groups, these several pathways to nuclear use are the central security threats to major powers that an international organization focused on international security needs to address in the new century.¹² How to do so?

3. How to gain peace in an era of WMD and fragile states?

Because of these dangers, the first-best scenario would be a world without nuclear weapons, with effective international controls and monitoring on fissile material, and without great power or minor power conventional war. This is a hard world to envision. For one thing, the existing nuclear powers are highly unlikely to give up nuclear weapons. And even if they could credibly commit not to build them in a pinch – which they cannot do – this might only bring a return to the temptations and insecurities associated with conventional war. Given that they cannot commit themselves against rebuilding, a world with no or very low levels of nuclear arms could be more prone to

¹¹ For example, Saddam Hussein’s desire to have potential domestic opponents believe that he might have weapons of mass destruction at the ready increased the Bush administration’s fears that he might really have an active program and at least biological and chemical weapons.

¹² Along with threats of mass casualties from biological or chemical weapons. Throughout I am taking “security threats” in the traditional sense of threats related to the possibility of violence by organized groups, particularly across international boundaries. Of course there are other very important global problems, such as climate change and economic development, that some would like to put under the “security” rubric. I don’t mean to take any position on that debate here.

nuclear detonations than the current one, due to incentives for preemptive attacks if states attempt to rearm when a conflict begins to get serious.¹³

But on the other hand, the scenario in which large numbers of states have nuclear arsenals seems if anything even more scary and dangerous. On the plus side, large-scale conventional war to take another state's capitol city would be unlikely in such a world. But nuclear terrorism would be favored by wide diffusion of fissile material and weapons, especially if they were in the hands of fragile, bureaucratically weak and/or authoritarian states that might suffer revolution or civil war. Moreover, preemptive strikes, with serious risks of nuclear use, could be common both on the way to and within such a world.

So we would like to be able to get as close to the first scenario as feasible. The central problems here are

1. how to limit the spread of nuclear weapons, especially to countries prone to political instability or territorial expansion;
2. how to reduce towards zero the arsenals of the nuclear states without increasing nonnuclear states' incentives to acquire WMD, and incentives for conflict and preemptive strikes among the nuclear states;¹⁴
3. how to control and monitor the production of fissile material, and how to keep stocks that exist safe from terrorists;

¹³ These problems are not addressed in George P. Schultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "Toward a Nuclear-Free World," *Wall Street Journal*, 15 January 2008.

¹⁴ The effects of nuclear disarmament by the nuclear-weapons states might be to reduce the prestige motive for nuclear acquisition by some states, but it could increase the bargaining leverage provided by WMD in international disputes, or the perception that bargaining leverage could be easily attained.

4. how to prevent or eliminate zones of anarchy and organized crime, where there is no de facto or no de jure sovereign government capable of policing the zone and being held responsible by the international community of states.

Nonnuclear states seek to develop nuclear weapons for three main reasons: fear that they will be attacked or coerced if they do not, a belief that nuclear weapons will enable them to be better coerce others, and for prestige. The first two motivations closely track territorial disputes and concerns about being pushed around by nuclear great powers or neighbors. These pressures for nuclear proliferation are weakened by the resolution of regional disputes (which often involve nationalist territorial conflicts, as in the Middle East, South Asia, and the Korean peninsula) and by good relations between regional powers and the U.S., Russia, and China.

In fact, the successful management of all four of the central problems listed above is favored by, or even requires, low levels of serious territorial and other specific issue disputes among regional and major powers. Effective international organizations can definitely help here, as I briefly discuss next. But there is a strong case that over the long-run, minimizing serious interstate disputes and thus the successful management of all four problems also requires the spread of genuine and capable democracy throughout the international system.

What sort of international institutions could help, and how? Fortunately, two major international institutions that already exist make great sense for addressing these problems, even given the current form of these institutions. Revised versions could be better still.

First, for the control and monitoring of fissile material, something like the International Atomic Energy Agency, or an enhanced version, is an obvious partial solution. Status quo states have common interests in the monitoring and control of nuclear materials and weapons production. Individual states cannot take on an intrusive monitoring role in other states. So it makes sense to delegate this role to an international institution that has the legitimacy, expertise, and resources to play it.

Second, it makes good sense to have a universal-membership organization that overweighs the major powers in terms of decision-making power, as in the U.N. Universal membership confers legitimacy on courses of action that member states can agree to, increasing compliance and making resistance harder to organize. Overweighting the major powers keeps the organization from self-destructing through the passage of unenforceable strictures on the strongest states. The main value of such an institution is that it facilitates “least-common-denominator” cooperation and coordination among the major powers, which can be significantly better than nothing. U.N. peacekeeping operations, for example, have been a highly useful means by which the major powers and troop contributors have ensured political order and continued peace in the aftermath of regionally destabilizing civil wars.¹⁵ This is an important function for humanitarian reasons, but also for addressing the fourth set of security problems listed above – zones of anarchy and organized crime. Another potentially very important role for the U.N. (or a U.N.-like organization) is authorizing the use of force to back up the IAEA’s mandate.

¹⁵ High profile PKO failures in Bosnia, Somalia, and Rwanda have detracted attention from a good number of success stories. To give just one example, without UNMIL in Liberia, I think it is highly unlikely that there would have been the peace we have seen there since 2003.

Despite their importance, there are intrinsic limitations on how far a UN and an IAEA (and the NPT regime it tries to implement) can go in resolving these core 21st century international security threats. When there are significant issue conflicts between states, especially among major powers, the least common denominator may amount to nothing. Perhaps reforms to the structure of the institutions could help a bit, but only so much in an international system that remains anarchical. For preventing or rolling back the spread of nuclear weapons and other WMD, we need fewer threats and fewer significant issue conflicts among middle and major powers. And for this there are good reasons to think that the spread and development of stable democracy would be a big help in the medium and long run.

As Carothers, Stedman, and Kupchan all observe, democracies do not by the fact of their regime type share perfectly common foreign policy interests. In general, however, they seem to have fewer reasons to fight with each other than they do with autocracies, or autocracies among themselves. Autocracies are threatened by the mere existence of democracies, whose example provides subject populations with an encouragement to revolt. Democracies have less reason to want to conquer new territory and subjugate the inhabitants, since this implies changing their form of government to autocracy (not so for autocracies).¹⁶ Greater domestic legitimacy may make democracies less prone to foreign aggression or “nationalist mythmaking” by autocrats trying to save their dictatorships from domestic threat.¹⁷ Empirically, although it is not clear if the

¹⁶ James D. Fearon, “A Simple Political Economy of Relations Among Democracies and Autocracies,” paper to be presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, August 2008.

¹⁷ Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2000) and Jack Snyder and Edward D. Mansfield, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005). Whether there is an empirical regularity here is disputed. See Vipin Narang and Rebecca M. Nelson, “Who Are These Belligerent Democratizers? Reassessing the Impact of Democratization on War,” *International Organization* 63, 2 (April 2009), 357-379.

relationship is causal, it is clear that democratic pairs of states have been less prone to military conflict than have mixed or purely autocratic dyads.¹⁸

Dictatorships are necessarily more secretive and opaque than democracies. Secrecy exacerbates the sense of interstate security threat, especially when nuclear weapons and weapons programs are in play. Autocratic governments that are less subject to monitoring and the rule of law at home may be more likely to lose control of nuclear materials or other WMD through corrupt dealing by elements in the regime, or the regime itself.

There are certainly competent autocracies that in the short run are much more trustworthy with nuclear weapons programs than are chaotic, transitional democracies. Compare, for example, China with Pakistan, where the A.Q. Khan network developed in part under elected governments. But in the long run, autocracies are unstable because they depend on repression and performance to stay in power, and performance varies.¹⁹

The spread of stable democracy to Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, and other major or regional powers would not eliminate serious issue conflicts and jockeying for regional influence. But we have good reason to think that it would reduce these and in turn increase the scope and ability of international institutions to manage the four core international security problems listed above.

4. How not to promote democracy

¹⁸ See Bruce Russett and John Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: Norton, 2001) for a summary of the main findings, debates and references.

¹⁹ Empirically, the transition rate out of democracy in the last 60 years has been significantly lower than the transition rate out of autocracy. Hence the change from an international system with less than one third of states being democracies, to a system that is more than half composed of democracies in the last 40 years. Coups and coup attempts are also more frequent in autocracies.

Carothers attacks the idea of a League of Democracies that is intended to make it easier for the U.S. to get international approval for military interventions. This concept of a League is presumably one source of its appeal to neoconservatives, who were angry about lack of approval for the Iraq war by the UN. In sharp contrast, liberal internationalists like the idea of a League because they see it as a better way to *constrain* the U.S. from bad projects like the Iraq war, while making it easier to undertake what they see as good interventions, including humanitarian interventions to prevent or end major human rights abuses. The idea is that the U.S. might have been less likely to have pressed the Iraq war against the disapproval of an international organization of democracies than it would against an institution like the UN Security Council, which confers veto power on nondemocratic states that the U.S. public is (even?) more willing to ignore. At the same time, the liberal internationalists suggest, a League of Democracies would be less stymied by autocracies like China and Russia when it comes to humanitarian interventions (for example, Kosovo, Darfur).²⁰

Foreign policy types in some of the major powers – especially in the U.S. and Britain – have become very keen on intervention since the end of the Cold War. The center-left usually likes the idea of UN peacekeeping operations. Left and Right like the idea the NATO interventions for humanitarian and post-conflict stability reasons. The Right (and maybe some others) like the idea of military interventions to prevent nuclear weapons development in violation of NPT commitments.²¹ One of the major lines of cleavage in the UN since the end of the Cold War has been between advanced industrial democracies who like the Security Council's ability to approve interventions of various

²⁰ It is not clear that this is good assumption. India, South Africa, and Brazil, for example, have not been enthusiastic about "humanitarian intervention," to put it mildly in the case of India.

²¹ For an example of the enthusiasm, see Daalder and Kagan, "The Next Intervention."

sorts, and developing countries that are skeptical or strongly opposed to “humanitarian intervention” in its various forms. Amazingly (and as part of a package deal), the UN membership voted in September 2005 to endorse the Responsibility to Protect doctrine (R2P). This holds that while states have the primary responsibility to protect their populations from major human rights abuses, if a state fails in this responsibility it is legitimately subject to U.N.-approved intervention to protect populations.²² For many in the OECD countries, this is obviously how it should be. Classical sovereignty is viewed as an outmoded and inappropriate ideal in this modern era.

Animated by the best humanitarian intentions, R2P and the idea of an interventionist League of Democracies nonetheless represent a destabilizing international doctrine. Supporters of these ideas have not realized or faced up to the negative international consequences of weakening the sovereignty norm by facilitating internationally approved military interventions. In brief, the international institution of sovereignty functions something like an arms control agreement. Weakening the institution of sovereignty increases incentives to arm, and to arm with nuclear weapons. Well-intentioned efforts to facilitate humanitarian intervention almost inevitably have this effect. Efforts to facilitate intervention to disarm states that the US (and/or other major powers) doesn’t like and that are trying to build nuclear weapons can have this effect. There is thus a tension between the core goal of a League of Democracies as conceived by its supporters, and the objective of a stable, peaceful world without diffusion and use of nuclear weapons and other WMD.

The traditional sovereignty norm says, in effect, “You don’t object to or threaten me over what I do within my borders, and I won’t threaten you over what you do in

²² U.N. General Assembly A/60/L.1 (2005 World Summit Outcome document), paragraphs 138-9.

yours.” This was a key premise of the post World War II United Nations system, despite some potentially contrary language in the UN Charter about human rights. Mutually recognized unconcern with what happens within other states’ borders lowers incentives to arm for defense, and to get into tit-for-tat support of oppositions or rebel groups with their neighbors.

So we have problem. In the long-run it seems that dealing with the core 21st century security challenges will require, or at least be greatly facilitated by, the spread of stable, capable democracies, especially among the major and second tier powers (those with ability to develop nuclear weapons and other nasty technologies). But military interventions can increase these states’ incentives to arm. This is true whether the purpose of military intervention is humanitarian, regime change, or to destroy nascent nuclear capability. Thus, a league of democracies – or for that matter, any retooled UNSC – built for the purpose of making easier major power intervention may work against the goal of controlling nuclear proliferation and consequent risks of nuclear terror.

This objection to the idea of a League of Democracies intended to facilitate certain kinds of military intervention for humanitarian or anti-proliferation purposes is different from the mainly pragmatic objections raised by Carothers, Kupchan, Stedman, and other recent critics of the proposal. It is not just that “if you build it, they won’t come,” or that a League of Democracies might not be any more likely to approve interventions the U.S. would like to undertake than the UNSC.²³ It is that aggressive democracy promotion via military efforts against autocratic regimes that commit massive

²³ The quote is from Kupchan’s article. As noted above, for Ikenberry and Slaughter and some other liberal internationalist advocates of a League, the fact that democracies would not make it any easier on average for the US to get support for intervention can be “a feature not a bug.”

human rights abuses or that try to develop nuclear weapons will probably increase incentives for arming and in some cases the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction.

This is not an argument against humanitarian intervention or intervention to prevent nuclear weapons development in any and all circumstances. My intention is to point out a trade off, or cost, that advocates of a League of Democracies – and, for that matter, R2P – have neglected. One important reason to desire the spread of stable democracy is that we have good reason to think this would ameliorate the international security problems posed by nuclear weapons. But aggressive democracy promotion will cut against this goal, even if there are cases where it is desirable on humanitarian grounds.

5. An International Organization for Democracies

A better idea for an international organization of democracies would be a club that states want to join, with a serious set of standards for being judged “democratic,” that are continually being applied to the current set of members. The model is an accreditation organization, not Security-Council-like body.

To be effective such an organization would require two key features. First and most important would be a credible, arms-length process for determining and renewing membership. Much as has already been done in the Community of Democracies, member states would agree to a charter or declaration of general principles about what standards and practices constitute electoral democracy.²⁴ But contrary to the CD in its

²⁴ Although fairly objective general standards for assessing “electoral democracy” can be agreed on – the CD’s experience illustrates this – the application of standards to particular cases inevitably requires judgments that, in the hard cases, may have subjective elements. As with courts, the solution here is to have the judgments made by experts who are chosen and given incentives so as to be as impartial as

current form, the member states would fully delegate the assessment of which members and nonmembers were meeting the standards to a committee of experts, which would have final authority over membership renewal and addition of new members. The value of the organization's imprimatur would depend in large part on the degree of insulation of the committee's assessments from the political interests of current members. Thus, some combination of fixed and relatively long terms, election to the committee by a supramajority rule, and closed door deliberations but publicly available reviews and assessments would be essential.²⁵

Second, an important feature of a useful and effective international organization for democracies would be – paradoxically – that it should *not* have any significant functional role or task. It should not be a forum for pronouncing or organizing support for humanitarian or any other sort of military intervention. It should not be a forum for votes to applaud or condemn regime changes towards or away from democracy in particular states. It should not in the first instance be intended to send missions to democratic aspirants to advise them on how to “shape up,” or to members to advise them on how to “tune up” (although I can imagine this last function developing over time).

The idea is to have an international organization that can officially assess whether a country's political system is democratic, in a credible, arms-length way. Although a

possible. The performance of a number of international courts suggests that such bodies can operate fairly and without strong influence from judges' home countries. The generally positive experience in the U.S. with organizations for accrediting schools and hospitals is another encouraging example.

²⁵ In an international organization, supramajority rule using a “one state one vote” rule can make for extremely inequitable distributions of voting power, given the incredible range in country populations. In a proposal for how states might be elected to an executive council of a reformed Community of Democracies, Robert Axelrod suggests supramajority rule with votes weighted by country population. Something similar might be a good idea for electing experts in the scheme sketched here. Robert Axelrod, “A Proposal to Elect a Successor to the Convening Group of the Community of Democracies,” University of Michigan, February 2, 2005. Available at http://www-personal.umich.edu/~axe/research/Community_of_Democracies_proposal.pdf.

number of research and NGO projects already provide ratings of democracy across countries, these do not have the official “buy in” and endorsement of a set of member states.²⁶ By accepting the invitation to join the organization, a democracy would be committing itself to be judged by the standards of the expert committee, so that it would be much more of a public embarrassment to be downgraded. By committing themselves to arms length review, member states would be committing themselves to the risk of being “named and shamed,” a compliance mechanism that seems to be extremely hard to make work in universal membership associations like the United Nations.²⁷ A leadership’s desire to do well in its periodic review could stimulate democratic reforms and better compliance with human rights norms.

Arms length certification of democratic credentials would be valuable to regimes for a number of reasons. Foreign aid and private capital flows would probably come to be influenced by having the credential. Domestic advocates of democracy would gain an argument against opponents of democracy in their country. Nondemocracies – whose leaders frequently claim “democracy” to their domestic audiences – would be embarrassed by exclusion if the membership decisions were plausibly not at the direction of powerful members of the organization. None of these are such strong incentives that they could single-handedly cause a transition to democracy or prevent reversion to autocracy. But they are not trivial and could help at the margin.

Why not have the organization pursue more functional tasks? The problems with a League of Democracies for ratifying interventions have been discussed at length above.

²⁶ In particular, Freedom House (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/>), Polity (<http://www.systemicpeace.org/>), and the World Bank’s Governance Indicators project (<http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.asp>).

²⁷ On naming and shaming see Emilie Hafner-Burton, “Sticks and Stones: Naming and Shaming and the Human Rights Enforcement Problem,” *International Organization* 62, 4 (October 2008), 689-716.

More generally, having such a large organization try to reach consensus or even majority positions on the political issues of the day would be fruitless and destructive, and not the point in any event. The point is not to express a common “democratic” point of view on international political issues – which typically wouldn’t exist – but rather to provide an incentive for states to become and stay genuinely democratic.

It could be argued that without some functional task beyond accreditation, it might be difficult to convince states to join. If so, one could propose an institutional capability to send to missions to assess how improvements could be made in the implementation of electoral laws and other aspects of democratic performance. It would be critical, however, that these missions be sent only at the request of a member state.

It is possible that this idea for an international organization of democracies could be realized through significant reform of the already existing Community of Democracies. To conclude this section, I briefly review the CD project and its potential relevance.

The CD is the result of an initiative of U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Polish Foreign Minister Bronislaw Geremek in 1999 and 2000. A “convening group” of the U.S., Poland, and five other states invited about 120 countries whose governments they deemed sufficiently democratic to meet for a ministerial conference in June 2000 in Warsaw. The main product of the meeting was a declaration and endorsement of a set of democratic principles. The CD has since reconvened three times, in 2002, 2005, and 2007, issuing more declarations each time.²⁸

²⁸ The best source on the declarations and other outputs of the conferences is the website of the Council for a Community of Democracies, an NGO that seems almost to play the role of a secretariat for the organization. See <http://www.ccd21.org/index.htm>.

In an excellent review of the CD's short history, Theodore J. Piccone argues that the group has made some limited progress in developing a process for deciding membership, which seems mean who gets invited to the conferences.²⁹ Although the self-appointed Convening Group still retains complete control of the invitations, it has expanded its number to 17, and in 2007 the Convening Group agreed to consider the recommendations of an independent advisory group of experts. Still, it is an embarrassment that the Community of Democracies is governed in an undemocratic fashion, by an undemocratically selected subset of countries. Both before and after the use of the expert advisory group, the U.S. has insisted on inclusion of some dubiously democratic allies or projects. For example, Iraq and Afghanistan were included in 2007 despite recommendations against by the expert panel.³⁰ As long as membership is decided ultimately by a self-appointed convening group, this is not an arms-length process that could have the credibility to make membership worth something.

Another problem with the CD, from the perspective of the arguments made above, is that its founders seem to have conceived of it as a sort of support group for democracies and aspiring democracies. Piccone says that "The organizers were hoping that, similar to the experience with the Helsinki Declaration process of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe, underperforming states, once they endorsed a credible declaration of democratic principles, could be persuaded or embarrassed into improving their respect for international norms they themselves had endorsed" (p. 6). That is, the idea was to allow marginal cases into the group in the hope that they could then be shamed or cajoled into improving their actual performance. There is also much

²⁹ "Democracies: In a League of Their Own? Lessons Learned from the Community of Democracies" Brookings Institutions Foreign Policy Paper No. 8, October 2008.

³⁰ Piccone, p. 7.

talk in the Warsaw Declaration about mutual encouragement and support, actualized to a very limited extent by two CD missions to “provide counsel” to emerging democracies in East Timor and Georgia, and support for a United Nations Democracy Fund to support civil society groups pushing democracy.³¹ Piccone and others are also disappointed that even the Convening Group has proven so thoroughly unable to take public positions on authoritarian backsliding in particular states, as a result of opposition from some BRICSAM countries who like the traditional idea of sovereignty.

An organization of states that gathers occasionally to say “we like democracy” has little point and little future. However, if an initiative by the Convening Group to reform the CD along the lines suggested here could succeed, then the CD could evolve into an official democracy-rating or accreditation agency with real bite. This might be easier to accomplish than to start fresh by founding a new organization. With significant constitutional reforms to the CD, the development of the independent advisory panel for making recommendations about whom to invite for the Bamako (Mali) conference in 2007 could be developed further into an arms length rating body. The Convening Group would have to put itself out of business by designing rules for elections to the expert panel and guidelines for its operation. Self-appointed groups of states with some privilege in international affairs do not usually like to put themselves out of business, but in this case the privileges or powers are so small or non-existent that it would be entirely possible with the leadership of a few states.

6. Conclusion

³¹ Piccone, pgs. 4-5.

A League of Democracies as it has been conceived by Ivo Daalder, John Ikenberry, Robert Kagan, John McCain, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and others is not a “rising institution.” As Carothers and other critics have pointed out, there will be few or no takers if a primary goal is to more easily or responsibly authorize collective support for humanitarian or other military interventions. Given the strong support of traditional sovereignty norms by democratic BRICSAMs like Brazil, India, and South Africa, it is also not clear if a League of Democracies could help solve the problems the advocates want it to solve.

Finally, as argued above, there are some strong and neglected arguments in favor of support for traditional norms of sovereignty defended by the BRICSAMs. Because humanitarian and other military interventions pushed by the strong states will tend to increase incentives for nuclear proliferation, it is not just weak states with abusive governments that should have an interest in non-intervention. There is a difficult trade-off here: aggressive international action to stop human rights abuses or stop nuclear weapons development in particular countries, versus longer-run negative effects concerning the spread of WMD.

There is less of a trade off, or less of a problem, if there are more stable democracies in the world that don’t abuse their populations and that don’t appear threatening in the manner of Kim Jong-il or Saddam Hussein. In the alternative conception for a League of Democracies sketched in this paper, the point is not to gather allegedly like-minded democracies together to deliberate on and authorize interventions, but rather to create an official international certification that a country’s political institutions are democratic. Such a rating could quickly come to have considerable value

for member states, and that value could inspire democratic reforms, improvements, and consolidation in both members and aspirants. No presumption of common views on foreign policy questions would be required, and such an organization would be very unlikely to cause countermobilization and organization by nondemocracies like Russia and China.

On average, the BRICSAM countries have somewhat less democratic political regimes than non-BRICSAMs, with the difference almost entirely due to China and the autocratic regimes in ASEAN.³² Except for India and Brazil, the democracies in BRICSAM are recently transitioned and may still be at serious risk of reversion to autocracy (consider, for example, Indonesia and the Philippines, or Thailand and Russia where reversion has already occurred). So one of the big questions concerning the BRICSAM countries and their impact on international politics must surely concern the direction of their political regimes – more democratic or more autocratic?

Although in some cases a stable autocracy might be better able to address international security problems such as nuclear proliferation than would a messy transitional democracy, on the whole and in the long run a democratic trend in these countries will probably be critical for allowing efficient and effective management of a large range of global commons problems. An international organization of democracies that has an arms-length procedure for designating and maintaining its membership could be a valuable institution for encouraging the democratic trend in BRICSAM countries,

³² Using the Polity data for 2006, I find that nonBRICSAM countries are about 60% democracies, 14% strong autocracies, and 26% autocratic but with some democratic features (this category is often called “anocratic” in the political science literature). By contrast, the 16 BRICSAM countries are 44% democratic, 31% strongly autocratic, and 25% in between. (These figures use the fairly conventional cutpoints of -5 and 5 on the “polity2” variable, which varies from -10 to 10.)

where leaderships are not going to fear humanitarian intervention or be swayed by foreign aid.