

# Global Crises and the Community of Democracies

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There are certain global issues that pay no attention to national borders or natural barriers: climate change; the COVID-19 pandemic; nuclear weapons proliferation; and a migration and refugee crisis. These challenges can only be met by collective action.

This demand binds every country to a multilateral system, but the current global framework is showing its age 76 years after the creation of the United Nations. To be sure, the network should keep out no one: even authoritarian nations belong at the table of universal membership bodies. Their role in potential solutions to world threats often intermingles with their tragic record as the source of many of the same challenges.

But democracies need to be at the global decision-making table in force if the world is to confront the existential threats facing humanity. These require coordinated solutions reflecting the inclusion and diversity that self-correcting representative political systems provide.

Nations unite and exert influence under regional banners like the African Union, cultural/linguistic alliances like the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, or religion-based groupings like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. So, too, should there be a coalition of countries acting as a bloc founded upon adherence to explicitly stated human rights and democratic values.

Fortunately, there is momentum behind a new multilateral structure for the world's democracies. Whether it's growing a D-10, or Democracy-10, from the current G-7 as suggested by Boris Johnson<sup>1</sup> or hosting a Summit for Democracy as pledged by President Joe Biden,<sup>2</sup> or people movements like 'NOW!' building a

league of democracies,<sup>3</sup> these are good steps in support of a values-based energizing of the global system.

21 years ago, driven by events of the twenty-first century, a group of thinkers turned its attention to giving a new global framework to the idea of democracy, which was rapidly becoming the dominant form of governance. At the founding of the United Nations in 1945, there were only 30 countries, almost all Western, that identified as democracies. With the swell of the 'Third Wave of Democratisation' described by Samuel Huntington,<sup>4</sup> by 2000, some 120 nations were considered democracies with representative and elected governments. And in notable instances, as in Portugal's Carnation Revolution in 1974, the contribution of outside support to indigenous democratic institutions, in that case by West German foundations linked to the country's political parties,<sup>5</sup> showed the importance of international democratic solidarity.

In his two terms of office (1993–2001), US President Bill Clinton made good on his 1992 campaign promise of promoting democracy around the world. In response to the increasing voices of 'America first' following the end of the Cold War, Clinton stated that official support for democracy was both in the national interest of the US and reflected America's values. Since 1993, significant government funding increases for democracy-supporting NGOs joined structural changes in US foreign policy. At the State Department, the little-known Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs

1 Erik Brattberg and Ben Judah, 'Forget the G-7, Build the D-10' (*Foreign Policy*, 10 June 2020) <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/10/g7-d10-democracy-trump-europe/>> accessed 7 June 2021.

2 Joseph R Biden Jr, 'Why America Must Lead Again' (*Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020) *Affairs* <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/>

[united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again](https://www.state.gov/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again)> accessed 7 June 2021.

3 'Our Story' (NOW!) <[https://www.now.world/our\\_story](https://www.now.world/our_story)> accessed 7 June 2021.

4 Samuel P Huntington, 'Democracy's Third Wave' (1991) 2(2) *Journal of Democracy* 12 <<https://www.ned.org/docs/Samuel-P-Huntington-Democracy-Third-Wave.pdf>>.

5 Soner Cagaptay, 'Portuguese Lessons for Turkey's Role in the Arab Spring' (*The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 15 December 2011) <<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/portuguese-lessons-turkeys-role-arab-spring>> accessed 7 June 2021.

was rebranded as Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour. The US Agency for International Development's stable of experts in global health delivery and clean irrigation systems developed new skillsets in elections and civil society support. And America's diplomatic missions were required to include information on democracy in their country reports back to Washington.

As the Clinton Administration drew near its end, a new expression was taking shape, a framework of cooperation to support democracies 'of every description to deepen and sustain their liberty'.<sup>6</sup> The largest-to-date gathering of established and young democracies was planned for June 2000, in a meeting titled 'Towards a Community of Democracies'. Born as an initiative of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's policy planning team, this convening for democracy was in line with the president's positions and policies, in all ways seemingly an idea whose time had come.

But at its birth, the concept was met with near-unanimous resistance by powerful elements within the State Department. Regional bureaus were unsure which of their portfolio countries might be invited or, of more significant concern, might *not* be invited. Treaty and international agreement lawyers were concerned that a summit-style discussion of 'rights' could bring new financial or legal obligations or commitments. Half of Foggy Bottom's power players wanted to support the president's agenda and supported a move forward as long as it wasn't a 'one-off event, but a lasting legacy', as one of the initiative's leading staff supporters said at the time. But the other half said they would 'grudgingly support a one-off event but no resulting permanent structure'.

A memo to the Secretary of State seeking action undergoes 'the Line':<sup>7</sup> many intermediate stops of bureaucracy, with each level revising the original document according to perceived equity in the topic. At its worst, the process is a potential death of a thousand cuts to any outside-the-box concept. The official memo route, characterized by impactful rewrites, was deftly bypassed in this case, allowing the concept to arrive unscathed to its receptive audience. Secretary Madeleine Albright, in turn, employed her own non-traditional mechanism to deliver the idea to President Clinton, who jotted down on the memo his approval ('this is a good idea') and his support ('please go ahead').

'Towards a Community of Democracies' took visible shape in 1999 with the early partnership of Bronislaw Geremek, Poland's Foreign Minister and former Solidarity activist. Albright and Geremek together were uniquely suited to host the gathering. Albright brought her experience, stretching from a refugee from authoritarianism to serve as the first woman Secretary of State. Geremek's personal story of freedom and its fragility began with his decision to resist tyranny after the 1968 Warsaw Pact crushing of the Prague Spring. Their partnership grew the conference into more than an American enterprise.

International concerns at American control were softened by expanding the partnership; still-important concerns at the State Department about which countries would be invited were mollified when a Convening Group of nations was assembled. Each region of the world was represented by one of its democracies. Countries

received invitations according to the assessment of their Convening Group neighbour.

Diplomatic gatherings need an outcome statement, a declaration, or some other formal concluding measure of the meeting. In preparation for the 2000 conference, the State Department policy planning team was tasked with gathering several international norms of democracy and human rights into a loose document shared with invited countries with the understanding that they were explicitly committing themselves to abide by them. The outcome document was to be a non-binding political declaration, not a treaty, thereby avoiding tendentious, lowest-common-denominator negotiations.

The starting point was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. New rights and principles were inserted into the draft concerning independent monitoring of elections open to multiple parties and civilian control of the military.

New language on independent media quickly drew the attention of the lawyers, who noted the proposed updated language was not found in existing international treaties. Compromises were reached, which said the press had a right to collect, report and disseminate information, news, and opinions, subject only to restrictions necessary in a democratic society and prescribed by law while bearing in mind evolving international practices in the field.

Another fought-for and retained principle set expectations of elected leaders in upholding the law and strictly following the country's constitution. The right of those duly elected to form a government, assume office, and fulfil the term of office as legally established was ground-breaking. The US State Department teams also secured the inclusion of an elected government's obligation to refrain from extra-constitutional actions, allow the holding of periodic elections and respect their results, and relinquish power when its legal mandate ends. (It's more than likely they were thinking of its application to developing-world democracies, never expecting its shocking relevance to their own country on 6 January 2021.)

Drafting the Declaration did not follow what was until then a standard United Nations multilateral format. To avoid watering down the final product, they largely discouraged efforts to negotiate its language—invitees to the 2000 conference were informed no significant re-writing would occur. Countries attending 'Towards a Community of Democracies' knew in advance what the document would say.

Even so, the Declaration wasn't purely an American exercise. In the internal State Department drafting group, career lawyers initially insisted on deleting the principle of the right to an education until drafters pointed out that it was part of the UDHR. Based on the UDHR, another significant outside contribution came just days before the actual gathering. A leading African democracy insisted that language around poverty reduction and economic development be included in the document.

The US foreign policy bureaucracy wasn't alone in expressing legal objections: another nation's formal review of the draft principles noted that some were not currently contained within then-existing treaties and agreements, viewing that as a reason to limit the draft's scope. But instead, their newness became a strong motivation for proceeding with the 19 principles at the 2000 gathering in Warsaw.

The draft's Principle One stated that the will of the people was the basis of the authority of government. The right of every person

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Carothers, 'The Clinton Record on Democracy Promotion' (2000) 16 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Democracy and Rule of Law Project, Global Policy Program <<https://carnegieendowment.org/files/16carothers.pdf>>.

<sup>7</sup> Ronan Farrow, *War on Peace* (Norton and Co 2018) 112.

to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion formed Principle Five. Principle Nine spoke to the universal right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. Other principles addressed freedom from arbitrary detention and torture, equal protection of the law for minorities or disadvantaged groups, independent judiciaries, and civilian, democratic control over the military. Eventually, 106 countries adopted the 19 principles, which became known as the Warsaw Declaration, a symbolic overriding of the Cold War-era Warsaw Pact.<sup>8</sup>

The Warsaw Declaration serves as the founding document for the Community of Democracies, a coalition of democratic states that coordinates action on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. For two decades, the Community of Democracies has reflected the diversity of world democracy. At its second global gathering, the 2002 Ministerial Conference in Seoul, 60 of the 115 participating countries were defined as ‘developing’ nations. The diversity and inclusion of the Community of Democracies are illustrated in the range of its two-year presidencies by the Republic of Korea, Chile, Mali, Portugal, Lithuania, Mongolia, El Salvador, the United States, and Romania. The Community of Democracies also reflects the essential practices and norms necessary for a political system to identify as a democracy. The principles of the Warsaw Declaration have been used as a ‘checklist’ by established democracies as to their performance and a baseline for invitation to ministerial meetings. The Declaration is also a roadmap to democracy for transitioning countries.

For a document that almost didn’t happen, it speaks to the universality of democratic principles that June 2020 marked the Warsaw Declaration’s twentieth anniversary, still used as a checklist and roadmap. As official tributes to the Warsaw Declaration were rendered and recorded, a desire to refresh its precepts’ expression arose. Former Secretary of State Albright urged the two-decades old Community of Democracies not to spend too much time looking backward at aging global architecture but work at empowering young people as they designed the framework of peace and democracy for the next two decades and beyond. ‘Freedom’s saga has just begun and I put my faith in you to write the next chapter of that story’, said Dr Albright, in one of *Time’s* ‘Letters to Young People who Inspire Us’.<sup>9</sup>

The Community of Democracies drew together a type of focus group, 17 young adults who were children at the time of the adoption of the Warsaw Declaration, and asked them ahead of a Summer 2020 virtual conference to examine its 19 principles. From South Africa to Haiti to the Philippines, the United Kingdom, and The Gambia, young activists found the Warsaw Declaration’s relevance to their lives. A Nigerian young man was drawn to the importance of Principle 18, democratic control over the military, recalling his father stumbling into the home after being beaten on the streets by military government soldiers. Principle Six’s right to equal access to education took on new meaning when the Nepalese activist told the story of the mass kidnapping by separatists of him and his classmates. All saw the Warsaw Declaration’s pledges as empowering young people today, with its commitments to equal access to public service, a seat at the table.

8 *Final Warsaw Declaration: Toward a Community of Democracies* (2000) <<https://community-democracies.org/app/uploads/2016/10/2000-Warsaw-Declaration-ENG.pdf>>.

9 Madeleine Albright, ‘Letters to Young People Who Inspire Us’ (*Time*, 16 January 2020) <<https://time.com/5764511/open-letters-to-youth-activists/>> accessed 7 June 2021.

Other new statements were chosen to mark the twentieth Anniversary. The idea of an artistic expression of the 19 principles came from the Community of Democracies’ current Presidency, Romania, and the host nation of the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies, Poland. The Community of Democracies turned to the historical legacy of Polish Poster Art to communicate its ideas.

With Jules Cheret’s discovery of color lithography in late nineteenth-century Paris,<sup>10</sup> graphic art had long been a medium of impact in Eastern Europe. From the beginning, Polish posters were ‘painterly rather than graphic’. Their designs expressed a message as well as an image.<sup>11</sup> Polish poster art’s peak popularity was during times of Communist censorship in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, as authorities sought to send messages while the people welcomed the injection of poster art color into grey Communist life. Artists had to work their way around state censors to present some degree of an anti-authoritarian message in a non-direct way, and theatre posters were the primary face of poster art.

The role of graphic design in Poland’s eventual liberation burst into the open in 1980, as Jerzy Janiszewski unveiled the Solidarity logo, expressing the message of Polish unity against a foreign-imposed dictatorship. The word Solidarity resembled a gathering of individuals standing in a tightly packed display of collective action.

Solidarity’s globally recognizable logo was featured in the bold expression of the *High Noon* poster of Tomasz Sarnecki in 1989. The Gary Cooper–Grace Kelly Western film from 1952 had received a broad airing in the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact, despite a review by Pravda panning the work ‘as a glorification of the individual’. The film’s underlying message against the Hollywood blacklist of the McCarthy era persuaded Communist censors to allow the film’s airing.

As the critical 1989 elections neared, Sarnecki adapted the *High Noon* movie poster, with the image of Gary Cooper’s character Will Kane holding a ballot rather than a pistol.<sup>12</sup> In place of the sheriff’s badge, which featured so prominently in the movie’s climax, was Janiszewski’s Solidarity logo. Sarnecki believed that, with this choice of an easily recognizable character, a symbol of black and white opposition in an individual situation, no words were needed to further the message and the era’s social context.

Western films were highly popular in Poland. History shows that, in this instance, Pravda had gotten it right: Polish people saw one man, Will Kane, standing against evil and oppression, not a story of Cold War persecution of artistic expression. Many people seemed to identify themselves with a sheriff restoring justice. Printed abroad and smuggled into the country just before the election, 10,000 *High Noon* posters appeared on walls across the country. On election day, Solidarity candidates won 160 of 161 seats in the parliament’s lower house and 92 of 100 in the upper chamber.

The Warsaw Declaration’s 19 principles are complex, as attested to by the lawyers who debated it 21 years previously. So, presenting

10 Jules Chéret’ (*Windsor Fine Art*) <<https://www.windsorfineart.com/jules-cheret>> accessed 7 June 2021.

11 Frederick Schneider, ‘Reflecting the Soul of a Nation: Polish Poster Art’ (*Illustration History*, 25 July 2015) <<https://www.illustrationhistory.org/essays/reflecting-the-soul-of-a-nation-polish-poster-art>> accessed 7 June 2021.

12 Michal Kuz, ‘High Noon and Polish Freedom: A History of Mutual Respect’ (*VoegelinView*, 5 January 2012) <<https://voegelinview.com/high-noon-and-polish-freedom-pt-1/>> accessed 7 June 2021.



**Fig 1** (smaller images). Posters of the 19 principles of the Warsaw Declaration, designed by Nikodem Pregowski on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Community of Democracies in June 2020. All rights reserved by the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies.

**Fig 2** (bottom right). CoD SG Thomas E Garrett speaking to Ambassador of Canada to Poland Leslie Scanlon at the exhibition of the Warsaw Declaration posters hosted by the Romanian Embassy in Warsaw, June 2020. All rights reserved by the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies.

each principle into basic yet engaging visuals presented a challenge to Polish graphic artist Nikodem Pregowski. Pregowski's work, at its core, prioritizes simplicity as a crucial element in poster art. Posters have to shorten and simplify communication with their audience, sometimes bringing abstract ideas to people. But alongside simplicity is often some intellectual engagement element. The visual has a simple form, but the viewer still has to interpret or decode the message. He settled upon the theme of a bird, as it connects to the notion of freedom across many cultures. A bird felt appropriate to a global coalition like the Community of Democracies. Designed for public display, the posters bring the Warsaw Declaration's principles to new audiences.

This is more than a history of how a group of countries united around a set of democratic values 21 years ago. Instead, it has urgent significance today when Hong Kong is rolling back once-promised freedoms, large parts of the Middle East remain unfree, authoritarianism is on the rise globally, and populism has taken root in the West. Any Google search or academic review of the subject literature—even a passing glance at headlines—turns up predictions of the decline of democracy, a recession, or even democracy's last breaths.

Yet, there are hopeful signs that democracy is pushing back. Increasing numbers of citizens have taken to the streets worldwide, calling for a more accountable government. Newer democracies like The Gambia recently rejected a murdering despot at the ballot box and swiftly re-entered the world community through the Commonwealth. Small Timor-Leste is pressing its more affluent Asian neighbours in ASEAN to adhere to democracy and human rights standards. And the Maldives went quickly from isolation after peacefully removing its authoritarian ruler to assuming a global voice on climate change.

Since Brexit, the United Kingdom has pursued foreign policy through an internationalist lens, prioritizing human rights, democracy, and good governance. Canada, France, Luxembourg, Mexico, Spain, and Sweden are pursuing a feminist foreign policy of inclusion and problem-solving. The United States, under the Biden Administration, is re-engaging multilaterally, as seen in the decision to rejoin the Paris Accords, remain in the World Health Organization, transition back onto the Human Rights Council in Geneva, and doing all this in an attitude of much-needed humility, seeking to erase the past four years of 'America First as America Alone' policies.

Today, just like 21 years ago, democratic solidarity is an idea looking for new expression, motivated by different pressures. A new model likely to emerge will focus on preserving existing democracy, tending to one's backyard, as much as promoting it to others. The new model will recognize that even established democracies like the US and UK have much work to improve their governance. Moving forward, the new or transformed democratic blocs should work together on equal footing, bound together by the principles and aspirations of the Warsaw Declaration.