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DEMOCRACIES VS. AUTOCRACIES OR RULES-BASED WORLD ORDER VS. ANARCHY?

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The recent news that China, India, Belarus, Mongolia, Tajikistan and other countries will participate in the Vostok 2022 military exercises in Russia helps to keep the discussion open on what could be the way forward to shape a new world order. In essence, it reiterates the doubts about the proclaimed position supported by the US that the future of world relations will be shaped by the confrontation between democratic and authoritarian countries. In fact, democratic countries (India, Mongolia) and authoritarian countries (Belarus, China, Russia, Tajikistan) will be present at the Vostok 2022 exercises, based on the criterion by which the participants in the "Summit for democracy" promoted by President of the US, Biden, in December 2021, were chosen. But this is not the only fact that calls into question the principle of opposition between democratic and authoritarian countries.

As some have pointed out, the list of participants in the "Summit for democracy" was based more on U.S. political interests than on "objective" assessments of respect for the rule of law. For example, the Summit was attended by the President of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, who is accused of crimes against humanity and is under investigation by the International Criminal Court (ICC), and countries such as Iraq, Angola, and the Democratic Republic of Congo that Freedom House considers as less respectful of the rule of law than Hungary, which was not invited. The South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, for his part, declined the invitation.

Another significant fact was the votes that took place in the UN General Assembly following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While there was an almost unanimous vote (141 votes) on March 3, condemning the aggression, with only five votes against and 35 abstentions, including China, India and South Africa, however, on April 7, the proposed suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council by the US had 93 votes in favour, 24 against and 58 abstentions (China voted against, while Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico and South Africa abstained. India and Indonesia, by population, are the first and second largest democratic countries in Asia).

A further salient point is the 14th BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) Summit held on June 23 and 24, an association which brings together authoritarian and democratic countries. At the end of the Summit, a declaration was approved which reaffirms (in addition to a hypocritical endorsement of the values of freedom, democracy and respect for human rights) support for multilateral institutions, particularly the WTO and the IMF. However, it contains no reference to the Russian-backed proposal to create a common currency to counter the US dollar. It is debatable whether support for multilateral institutions is dictated by reasons of expediency (certainly), rather than by a convinced adherence to the principle they represent (questionable), but the decisive fact remains that they are not contested.

It is a fact that in the international arena, where the logic of power politics still prevails, alliances are usually built on the basis of political interests, rather than on the basis of shared values, and the history of international relations has numerous examples of such alliances. During the confrontation with the former USSR, the US did not hesitate to enter into alliances with the regimes of Greece, Portugal and Spain, that were not only authoritarian but also dictatorial, while in Latin America, to counter the spread of communism, it tolerated or supported Latin American dictatorships, even passively accepting the reversal of the outcome of democratic elections.

These facts have been recalled because they are believed to clearly highlight that the old world order, based on American supremacy alone, is losing acceptance and that, faced with the task of redesigning a new world order, two alternatives are emerging: one is indicated by President Biden who, behind the screen of the opposition between democracies and autocracies, actually intends to perpetuate American hegemony; the other is to accept the fact that new actors in world politics are appearing who want to participate, on an equal footing with the United States, in the governance of a growing global interdependence and thus in the construction of a new, more balanced and more peaceful world order.

The first alternative is a dead end. It does not correspond to the convergence of interests on points of shared concern, such as climate change, the provision of global public goods such as maritime safety, the prevention of conflicts, especially in Africa, and global pandemics, not to mention the prevention of a nuclear catastrophe. During the Cold War, two continents which roughly had the same population were competing; they were economic systems without economic-industrial ties, and industrially, technologically and militarily, the balance weighed on the side of the US. Today, the world has changed radically. There are new players with a population that is 4-5 times that of the US and whose industrial, technological and military systems compete with and are interconnected with the US.

The second alternative is the only point on which there can be convergence among the different actors in world politics, and it is also the only one that, albeit in the long run, can allow autocracies to evolve towards a more democratic system, as was the case with the regimes of Spain, Greece and Portugal. Strengthening the role of multilateral institutions - the most far-sighted legacy left to us by Rooseveltian America - is a distinctive factor, as explained by [Joseph Stiglitz](#) ("*The only way forward is through true multilateralism, in which American exceptionalism is genuinely subordinated to common interests and values, international institutions, and a form of rule of law from which the US is not exempt*") and, more recently, by [Fareed Zakaria](#) in the Washington Post ("*A much better way to frame the division in the world is between countries that believe in a rules-based international order and those that don't*"). To date, however, the US does exactly the opposite: it calls for the intervention of the ICC for Russian crimes in Ukraine, but has never ratified the treaty; it protests Chinese violations of the South China Sea, but has never signed the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Trump's election to the presidency has highlighted that Atlantic politics is no longer a bipartisan policy but an object of political contention. The US, therefore, is unlikely to take a leading role in a world policy aimed at strengthening multilateral institutions. It is also unlikely that any of the authoritarian countries will be able to assume this leadership role. The only actor that can play an active role in this regard is the EU, not only because multilateralism is the policy on which all European countries agree, but because it is the area most open to world trade and therefore has an objective interest in strengthening multilateral institutions. The EU must certainly become a credible interlocutor on a global scale, and therefore must take steps toward an autonomous foreign and security policy.

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(The opinions expressed here do not necessarily represent the CSF)

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