

The Flaw in the US Plan to Rally Democracies Against China

Washington is trying to build a coalition of the world's democracies as if they all have the same ideals, systems and goals

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US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called last week for “a new alliance of democracies” to fight what he called “the tentacles of the Chinese Communist Party”. In a speech delivered at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library in California, Mr Pompeo bluntly called for “the freedom-loving nations of the world” to band together to oppose it.

Some regard the remarks as being recklessly confrontational. Others point out that there are plenty of countries that do not wish to choose between the US and China, and need to [remain on civil terms](#) with both countries.

I would agree with both statements; but here I wish to concentrate on Mr Pompeo’s view that the world is divided into two camps.

“The challenge of China demands exertion, energy from democracies,” he said, “those in Europe, those in Africa, those in South America, and especially those in the Indo-Pacific region.”

Such a putative alliance of democracies makes little sense. For Mr Pompeo is making a category error. He is attempting to corral a hugely disparate cohort of countries together on the supposition that all democracies are essentially alike and share the same interests and values. And on this he could not be more wrong.

Some democracies are liberal democracies, of course; and it is implicit in Mr Pompeo’s speech that this model – as practised in North America and western Europe – is what he has in mind. There are also states whose populations have freely voted for a more conservative, even explicitly “illiberal”, direction, most notably [Hungary and Poland](#), but which nevertheless remain democracies.

But there is a third class of countries, possibly the majority in Africa and Asia, and certainly in the Indo-Pacific region that Mr Pompeo underlined, that have such different cultures and values that it makes no meaningful sense to say that they have the same political systems as those of France or America.

Some more perceptive western analysts are aware of this. On a Twitter discussion about Mr Pompeo’s speech, Professor Patrick Porter of Birmingham University pointed out that with states such as India or Indonesia, “labelling them liberal democracies is glib”. I would go further and state unequivocally that [Indonesia](#) has never been a liberal democracy, and that

under Narendra Modi neither is India.

There is a problem of long-term perception here, that I explored at length in [a despatch](#) from Asia published by the Erasmus Forum earlier this year.

On independence, or on achieving freedom from dictatorship, many developing states looked like liberal democracies. No wonder. As James Chin, Director of the Asia Institute at the University of Tasmania, has written:

“More often than not, local elites simply imported and modified the political systems of their European overlords. Thus, former British colonies [Singapore](#) and Malaysia adopted the Westminster system, while the Philippines took on the US system.” Indonesia and Thailand embraced aspects of both, he said.

Newer constitutions, such as those established in 1993 in Cambodia and 2008 in Myanmar, have made sure to mention key liberal democratic concepts such as separating the legislative, executive and judicial powers.

But the high visibility of westernised and frequently western-educated elites often obscured the fact that many of these countries were never truly “liberal” as Europeans understand the term. Religion occupied too prominent a space in politics and cultural norms for that to be so, as did a tendency towards both authoritarianism – dictators such as Indonesia’s [General Suharto](#) and the Philippines’ Ferdinand Marcos are celebrated by many of their countrymen to this day – and majoritarianism.

It was those countries’ right to take these courses; but they diverged significantly from the western liberal democratic model.

The idea of universal rights is shared with the West. But documents such as the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (1990) and the Bangkok Declaration (1993) stress their own versions, requiring accordance with Islamic Sharia in the first instance, and “national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds” in the second.

The late Malaysian intellectual Noordin Sopiee mentioned another difference. In Asian societies, he wrote, there was “dramatically less importance attached to: ‘thinking for oneself’, ‘free expression’, ‘open debate’, and ‘individual rights’.” More important, he said, were: “hard work, respect for authority, the ethic of the community rather than the individual, love of consensus and harmony, an orderly society.”

In these countries, I concluded in my Erasmus Forum despatch: “Outsiders see the facade of liberal democracy. They do not realise that inside many of the furnishings – including overriding attachments to liberal values and individual rights – are missing.”



Sheikh Zayed, the Founding Father, meets citizens in Ghayathi in 1976. Mike Pompeo fails to take account other forms of democratic consultation, such as the majlis in the Arabian Gulf.

The facade is sometimes deeply misleading. When the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia finished its post-civil war mandate in 1993, the country was supposed to be a

flourishing democracy with ample room for civil society. But this was all a “mirage on the Mekong”, according to Sebastian Strangio, author of the excellent forthcoming book *Cambodia: From Pol Pot to Hun Sen and Beyond*. The iron grip of long-time leader Hun Sen has rarely wavered.

Cambodia is [an extreme example](#), and cannot be considered a democracy of any kind. And to be clear, far from criticising developing countries that are not liberal democracies, I believe in their right to develop systems of government that make sense locally, and which draw on their own values, culture and history. These were all too often suppressed under colonial rule and their re-emergence may constitute a more authentic representation of national identities.

Mr Pompeo misses all this. He appears to think that democracy is one-size-fits-all. He also fails to take account other forms of democratic consultation, such as [the majlis and shura council tradition](#) in parts of the Arab world.

So a true “alliance of democracies” would be so all-encompassing that it would include many states that are not very “liberal” and see no reason to pick a fight with China. If Mr Pompeo wants to get together a group of liberal democracies to gang up on Beijing, that is a different thing, and he should say so. Meanwhile there will be a host of other healthy democracies that will not want to.

Saying that all democracies are the same is a tired old habit that ignores the different value systems that animate the practice of democracy around the continents. By this point in the 21st century, America’s top diplomat should certainly know better.

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