

ANALYSIS

Why Biden's Anti-Putin Democracy Crusade Is Failing

Washington's framing of its fight against Russian aggression has failed to win over most of the world.

By [Michael Hirsh](#), a senior correspondent at *Foreign Policy*.

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In the beginning, Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine appeared to be an ideal rationale for U.S. President Joe Biden's global democracy campaign. What better endorsement could there be than the spectacle of a brave, doughty democracy fighting off a brutal autocrat?

As Biden put it in a [major speech](#) in Poland in March, Ukraine was now "on the front lines" in "the perennial struggle for democracy and freedom." But despite Ukraine's success on the ground against Putin's military, the White House's efforts in the months since to frame the conflict as a titanic worldwide battle between democracy and autocracy don't appear to be working very well. Outside of Western European allies and longtime U.S. partners such as Japan, much of the rest of the world simply isn't signing on. Problem one: Most of these countries either aren't democracies or are so deeply flawed as democracies that they're less than inspired by the rhetoric. Problem two: In the eyes of much of the world, the country that's doing the preaching—the United States—is a badly broken democracy that ought to heal itself first.

These problems were evident at the White House this week, when Biden welcomed leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), most of whom are autocrats or represent one-party states that show no signs of going democratic. Among them: Cambodia's longtime strongman Hun Sen; Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha, a former general who seized power in a 2014 coup; and the authoritarian leaders of Vietnam, Laos, and Brunei. To Biden's relief, the head of Myanmar's junta, Min Aung Hlaing, another ASEAN member, was not among them.

On Wednesday, Kurt Campbell, Biden's lead White House advisor on East Asia, acknowledged that the talks would be "maybe a little bit uncomfortable at times" but did not directly address the issue of flagging democracy in the region. "I do think we will have a full exchange and we acknowledge that there are differences of view," he said at a forum at the United States Institute of Peace.

Most of these countries have indicated they are nonaligned in the struggle between Russia and the West; Indonesia, another leading ASEAN member and a democracy, has even invited Putin to the G-20 summit it is hosting in November. The ASEAN countries are joined by nations across the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America, and Africa—countries that include a number of democracies but also a quasi-rogue gallery of autocrats and dubious democrats who represent the majority of the world's population. And they are not persuaded that Russia, a major source of oil and gas supplies, needs to be cut off from the global system.

"Their attitude is, 'Who are you to be telling us what to do or telling us what our rights are? People in your country who win the popular vote don't even get elected president. So don't preach to us!'" said Michael Coppedge, an expert in democratization at the University of Notre Dame who is one of the managers of an exhaustive international study by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, released last month.

According to a report by Freedom House, "Reversing the Decline of Democracy in the United States," "[A]mid a 16-year decline in global freedom, democracy in the United States has suffered serious erosion." The report found that the United States had dropped to level of flawed democracies like Panama, Romania, and South Korea and concluded, "The weakening of American democracy did not start with [former U.S.] President [Donald] Trump's direct pressure on democratic institutions and rights, and his departure from the White House has not ended the crisis."

Critics say that while the Biden administration's framing of the conflict is working well within NATO and the West—joined by firm U.S. allies such as Japan and South Korea—the U.S. president needs to rethink his approach if he wants to corral more allies in his efforts to isolate and weaken Russia. The real issue being tested, they say, is not democracy per se but rather an issue that most countries can identify with more readily: the sanctity of their borders

under post-World War II norms upheld by United Nations-sanctioned international law.

“This is about territorial integrity and non-use of force to change borders, along with international norms. Those are the core issues,” said Bruce Jentleson, a political scientist at Duke University and a former senior foreign-policy advisor to former U.S. Vice President Al Gore and the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff. “In that respect, it’s akin to Kuwait 1990,” when then-U.S. President George H.W. Bush won a broad international consensus against then-Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. In an email, Jentleson added that while he has “great admiration” for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s wartime leadership, Ukraine itself has long been known to be a “questionable democracy” and one of the world’s most corrupt countries.

Chas Freeman Jr., a former senior U.S. diplomat who helped to frame George H.W. Bush’s “new world order” concept during the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf crisis, agreed with this assessment. And Biden has indeed condemned Russia’s invasion as “a flagrant violation of international law.” But Freeman said the United States would have to work hard to restore its credibility on that front in the wake of its own more recent violations of international norms, including the use of torture and the invasion of Iraq.

“We need to return to the basic principles of international law that we foolishly set aside, but that’s going to be a problem,” Freeman told *Foreign Policy*. “The United States sponsored, created, and enforced what is now called the liberal international order after World War II. So you have the U.N. Charter, which lays out the basic principles of international law. You can’t go to war without a justification from the U.N. Security Council, which we had [in 1990-91]. But that was the last time we observed those norms. After that, every principle of international law that we pioneered, we violated.”

Returning to those basic principles, with appropriate *mea culpas*, may be the only course forward if the United States is to win over much of the world, Freeman said. What won’t work, he added, is evangelizing about the glories of democracy—an old American habit, and one that he believes the Biden team is resorting to for largely domestic political benefit.

“I’ve thought from the beginning that frankly this is a load of crap,” Freeman said. “It’s a very American conceit. And it’s particularly ironic that it should

come to the fore during a period when our own democracy is manifestly in deep trouble and we're not even sure we're going to have a peaceful transition in 2024."

Biden's credibility problem extends to other major nations that have not gone along with Biden's campaign—and which continue to temporize over the Russian invasion. For India, the issue has little to do with democracy and everything to do with border security, said Rani Mullen, a scholar at the College of William & Mary. Its increasingly autocratic leader, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is a populist fanning sectarian hatred between Hindus and Muslims while on the international stage, he pursues relations with both Moscow and Washington. Since the beginning of the year, India has dramatically stepped up its purchases of discounted Russian oil—which Modi desperately needs to shore up India's weakening economy.

Modi's stance is entirely about realpolitik, said Mullen, an expert in South and Central Asia. And that means maintaining workable relations with Russia so as not to encourage a deeper partnership between Moscow and China, the Indians' most feared potential aggressor along with Pakistan, which has a cozy relationship with Beijing. For New Delhi, the most paramount issue is border integrity under the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement (which the Chinese call the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence") between India and China.

"Ultimately, India's stance is driven by thinking that alienating Russia will undermine its security," Mullen said. "Democracy? What does it care? That's the reality of it. It's all about China. So framing Russian actions in a way that would guarantee mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity—that would strike a different chord."

More broadly, the stark fact Biden must confront is that democracy has been in retreat since the Cold War. "The level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2021 is down to 1989 levels. The last 30 years of democratic advances are now eradicated," a report by the V-Dem Institute said.

"Dictatorships are on the rise and harbor 70% of the world population—5.4 billion people." The study found that liberal democracies can now be found in only 34 nations, down from its peak of 42 in 2012, which are home to only 13 percent of the world's population.

A key fence-sitter in this global struggle over international norms is authoritarian China, which has sought to find a middle ground between Russia and the West. Chinese President Xi Jinping is sticking by his partnership with Putin, yet Beijing has mostly observed economic sanctions against Russia. Chinese officials say their country is loath to choose sides, but Washington has made that difficult by portraying the conflict as one that is primarily about Western-style democracy rather than global norms. As [Robert Manning](#), a former U.S. intelligence official and senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, wrote in *Foreign Policy* this week: “The logic of ‘democracies only’ could lead to a bifurcated or maybe trifurcated world.”

China covets Taiwan much as Russia does Ukraine, but even Washington still officially embraces its long-time “one China” policy, acknowledging that Taiwan is part of a single China. Beijing is angry that this diplomatic mainstay is also fraying, with Biden’s State Department removing such language from its official guidance website, which no longer states that Washington “does not support Taiwan independence.” Nor has the Biden administration offered up any new initiatives to wean Beijing away from Moscow.

Other major nations, even those that are democratic, also are making calculations based on factors that have little to do with the threat to democracy. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro recently said he would continue to support Russia’s participation at international forums, such as the G-20, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.

Some experts say the inconsistencies in Biden’s approach to democracy have hurt him as well. The president’s virtual democracy summit at the end of last year was widely criticized for the seemingly arbitrary way some countries were invited while others were snubbed. The Philippines’ anti-U.S. president, Rodrigo Duterte, was welcomed for example despite his violent campaign of extrajudicial executions, whereas Washington-aligned Singapore, which was rated “partly free” in Freedom House’s annual study of rights and liberties worldwide, was excluded. Singapore’s [Freedom House ranking](#) was also higher than some other invitees, such as Angola, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Lebanon. In the Philippines, Duterte will soon be replaced by Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the son and namesake of the country’s long-time dictator, who has said he wants to draw closer to Beijing.

“Countries that are not democratic are being treated as democratic. It’s completely a fool’s errand,” said Raffaello Pantucci, a visiting senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. “It alienates people on the ground.”

Yet for all that, Ukraine is also not Kuwait circa 1990-1991: a state ruled by monarchs. It is genuinely a democracy in peril. And Biden appears unready to compromise on an agenda that he has embraced since the beginning of his presidency, when he declared in his first State of the Union address that “In the battle between democracy and autocracy, democracies are rising to the moment, and the world is clearly choosing the side of peace and security.” Biden administration officials like to point to the economic weight of the United States and its Western allies, which make up “50 percent-plus of global GDP” while “China and Russia are less than 20 percent,” as U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said in February.

The president has plenty of allies—most of whom dwell within a Washington intellectual bubble that has quixotically promoted democracy since the end of the Cold War, even in the face of many setbacks. The *Washington Post’s* editorial board this week, for example, disagreed about compromising the United States’ democracy agenda, urging Biden to tell “the individual ASEAN leaders he meets the truth about their abuse of power.” The editorial warned that the United States should not make the same mistake it did during the Cold War, when it frequently cultivated anti-communist autocrats only to be accused of hypocrisy. “In fact, past instances in which the United States preached democracy but practiced realpolitik have come back to haunt its current effort to rally the world behind Ukraine’s cause. This week, Mr. Biden has a chance to show he has learned from that history.”

Other experts agree, though many believe a more nuanced approach is needed. “I think a geopolitical framing of this conflict would be more accurate in some respects, but I’m not sure it would be equally effective, at least within Europe,” Coppedge said.

“There’s something about having an inspiring goal to unite around that has been very effective,” he added. “I think Putin’s failed gamble in Ukraine has a chance of turning around the wave of autocratization we’ve been in.” Yet Coppedge also said Biden’s grand conception of a battle for democracy against autocracy remains, for the moment, “aspirational.”

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