



GLOBAL REACTION TO THE PROPOSED

“LEAGUE OF DEMOCRACIES”

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INTRODUCTION

In a November 2007 article in scholarly journal *Foreign Affairs*, presumptive Republican presidential nominee Senator John McCain revealed a central tenet of his foreign policy platform: the League of Democracies.¹ In describing the membership and purpose of such a coalition, Sen. McCain envisioned an organisation of “like-minded nations working together for peace and liberty” and which “could act when the UN fails.”²

Though Sen. McCain continues to advocate for the League of Democracies, he has softened his rhetoric regarding the functions of the organization. In an interview with reporters on 11th April 2008, McCain said, “It does not envision military action...it would ‘not be a formal organization; it would be a coalition of nations that shifts sometimes depending on what their priorities are.’”³ However, McCain’s campaign firmly maintains that the concept is the same.⁴

Despite Sen. McCain’s assertions that the purpose of such an organization would be to complement rather than supplant the United Nations, UN supporters are paying a considerable (and understandable) amount of attention to McCain’s proposal. This paper canvasses the worldwide response to McCain’s League of Democracies.

NOT NECESSARILY NEW BUT CERTAINLY DIFFERENT

Supporters of Sen. McCain’s proposal have been quick to claim that the idea is not a new one at all. Specifically, they point to “a prototype organization...created by the Clinton administration’s secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, and democracy specialist Morton Halperin.”⁵ This referencing to the Community of Democracies is potentially misleading as a precedent. Though then-Secretary of State Albright and Morton Halperin indeed did found the Community of Democracies in 2000, both individuals have opposed Sen. McCain’s proposal. When recently asked in an interview about Sen. McCain’s League of Democracies, Secretary Albright responded that the idea “doesn’t make sense to me.”⁶ In a similar vein, Morton Halperin recently co-authored a piece in which he accepted that the Community of Democracies was “a similar but more modest experiment” but that he “couldn’t disagree more with the timing and substance of McCain’s approach.”⁷

OBAMA YET TO RESPOND

Senator Barack Obama, presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, has not expressed his position on his opponent’s proposal.⁸ However, in the past and recent present, two of his top policy advisers – Anthony Lake and Ivo Daalder – have spoken in favour of the idea.⁹ In fact, Daalder has long been a supporter of the concept.¹⁰ However, Mr. Lake, at least, has been clear to state that his views are his own and that he has not discussed the issue with Sen. Obama.¹¹

Taking a different position, Richard Danzig, who serves as Sen. Obama’s national security adviser, has spoken critically of the idea and described it as “an outgrowth of...the Bush administration’s ‘you’re either with us or against us’ approach to foreign policy.”¹² Danzig continued on to critique the idea as seeing “the we-they character of the world, when in fact the world is more complicated than that.”¹³

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE

The House of Lords is the only House of Parliament to have debated the proposal for a "League of Democracies" and this occurred only once. UNA-UK's chair Lord Hannay of Chiswick as well as Lord Howell of Guildford, Lord Wallace of Saltaire, Lord Anderson of Swansea, and Lord Howe of Aberavon all spoke against the idea. Introducing the topic, Lord Hannay stressed the importance of discussing the issue now in its fledgling form rather than later in the wake of "an American president who thought that it was a good idea."¹⁴ Lord Hannay highlighted two major shortcomings of the idea: the undesirability of parsing the world into "democratic sheep and undemocratic goats" and the impracticality of the participation by "any of the large democracies of the developing world."¹⁵

Strongly agreeing with Lord Hannay, Lord Howell stated that the Commonwealth already served as "a perfectly good, transcontinental and multifaith network of either democracies or aspiring democracies" and should be given more support.¹⁶ Lord Wallace opposed the idea on the grounds that it appeared to be another neo-conservative idea "with a number of undesirable undertones," particularly its exclusiveness.¹⁷ Lord Anderson took issue with the proposal on a practical level. Using a football analogy, he thought such a league would inevitably be divided into "a premier division, a first division and a second division," which would be "a recipe for discord."¹⁸ Finally, Lord Howe stated his belief that there are a sufficient number of such organisations.¹⁹

Despite these comments, Lord Bach did not simply dismiss the idea. Instead, he maintained that the Government was assessing ways to improve the current international institutions and that it remained "open to new suggestions and ideas; let a thousand flowers bloom."²⁰

EUROPE REMAINS QUIET ON THE ISSUE BUT OBSERVERS BELIEVE IT WILL BE A HARD SELL

Sen. McCain claims that "his proposal was 'being talked about' by such figures as French President Nicolas Sarkozy, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and German Chancellor Angela Merkel."²¹ In a conversation with US-based conservative bloggers, Sen. McCain singled out President Sarkozy and Chancellor Merkel as his prime targets to whom he would sell the idea.²² But, to date, it seems that no European officials have come out in firm support or opposition of Sen. McCain's proposal. Furthermore, one academic has claimed that "he could not detect a 'trace' of interest among European diplomats for establishing a league."²³ However, past and recent comments by several European officials might provide hints as to which way they would lean if the idea were to gain steam.

United Kingdom: Prime Minister Gordon Brown has met with Sen. McCain on at least one occasion during which the "League of Democracies" was discussed.²⁴ However, an unnamed senior British official has "said that although Brown had developed an agenda for reforming international institutions, McCain's concept 'doesn't fit in our plans.'"²⁵

On the other hand, Foreign Secretary David Miliband has said that he has "an open mind on the subject" but that "it depends how it's done."²⁶

Denmark: In a February 2008 address to the US Chamber of Commerce, the Prime Minister of Denmark employed rhetoric that seemed quite similar to Sen. McCain's "League of Democracies" proposal. He spoke of the creation of "a global alliance of democracies" and "an obligation to reach out to such like-minded partners."²⁷

France: Sen. McCain's exclusion of Russia in his proposal is unlikely to go down well with the French either. A recent article noted that

"Even in France, where the Sarkozy line six months ago was all about Russia's 'brutality,' McCain may now hear concern for Russian 'sensibilities,' and that, in Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner's words, Moscow must now 'have the place that belongs to it.'"²⁸

Germany: Sen. McCain is floating an idea that excludes Russia at the same time that German officials are looking to nurture its relationship with the country. In a recent speech in Berlin, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier

“sounded as if he was calling for the future of Europe's relationship with Russia to be placed on a similar level of weight and value as its involvement with the United States...Talking of Europe, Steinmeier said, 'Working on a "peace order," which includes our trans-Atlantic allies just as it does our eastern neighbors, is and remains today our essential mission and responsibility.'”²⁹

Italy: As far back as 2003, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi strongly endorsed American-style interventionism and, if necessary, an overhaul of the international regime that sees “the sovereignty of a single state as inviolable.”³⁰

“[T]here were many ways in which Western countries could and should promote their values, including placing economic sanctions on totalitarian governments...But, the prime minister added, the 'community of democracies' must be prepared to use force in certain cases, as it did in Iraq.”³¹

Spain: There has not yet been a statement on the issue from the Spanish government. However, former Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar recently called for NATO to “assert its identity as an alliance of democracies with a wider vision than Atlantic security, and... to collectively address global terrorism.”³²

DEVELOPING WORLD DEMOCRACIES CLOSELY ALLIED WITH THE POTENTIALLY EXCLUDED

Thus far, no senior officials or politicians from developing world democracies have commented publicly on Sen. McCain's proposal but observers believe that these countries would be the toughest to bring into the fold. The first difficulty would be determining the criteria for membership in such an organisation. Understanding this complexity, Baron (Douglas) Hurd of Westwell recently wrote, “So we include Taiwan, Israel (and perhaps Gaza) and keep out China, Egypt and Jordan. Presumably we keep Pakistan and Thailand in a permanent pending tray as they move in and out of democracy.”³³

Further obstacles were well summarised by two former supporters of the 1990s Community of Democracies:

Why would such diverse countries as India, Brazil, Nigeria, South Africa, Turkey, Mexico, Indonesia and Japan, critical to any functioning League of Democracies, join a new organization in which their interests were not aligned and which would inevitably create major tensions with some of their closest partners?³⁴

As Lord Hannay observed, “A brief survey of the UN voting records of [India, Brazil, and South Africa] would reveal that they are among the most anti-interventionist of all UN members and the most hesitant about authorizing the use of force.”³⁵ Lord Hannay went on to pose the simple question: “Have any of the champions of a league of democracies thought to ask the Indians or Brazilians what they think about the idea?”³⁶

On a similar note, former UN Under-Secretary-General Shashi Tharoor finds the argument that a League of Democracies would act in instances where the UN has failed to be a specious one:

The advocates of a league of democracies argue that it would intervene more effectively in cases like Darfur or the cruel indifference of the military regime in Burma to the sufferings of its cyclone victims. That is a delusion. Such interventions have not occurred because they are impracticable. Humanitarian aid could not have been delivered effectively in the Irrawaddy Delta in the teeth of active resistance by the Burmese junta, or in Darfur by going to war with the Sudanese army, unless the countries wishing to do this were to be prepared to expend a level of blood and treasure that democracies rarely risk for strangers.³⁷

INTRODUCTION

Since Sen. McCain first revealed his League of Democracies proposal, most of the response has remained largely within Washington D.C. political circles. Though the UK government has not yet taken a position on the idea, the relevant Parliamentary debate suggests that the government would face considerable opposition if it backed the idea. The stance of other European nations strongly hints that they would not embrace the idea. Similarly, Sen. McCain will likely find it quite difficult to bring many of the developing world democracies on board.

¹ McCain, John. "An enduring peace built on freedom." Foreign Affairs, Nov/Dec 2007.

² Ibid.

³ Richter, Paul. "McCain eases proposal for alternative to U.N." *Los Angeles Times*, 21 Apr 2008.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Diehl, Jackson. "A 'League' by other names." *Washington Post*, 19 May 2008.

⁶ Fitzgerald, Patrick. "Albright assesses US policies." *Stanford Daily*, 28 May 2008.

⁷ Piccone, Ted & Halperin, Morton. "A League of Democracies: Doomed to fail?" *International Herald Tribune*, 5 Jul 2008.

⁸ "McCain 'League of Democracies' gains support." Associated Press, 30 May 2008.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Daalder, Ivo & Lindsay, James. "Democracies of the world, unite." The American Interest, Jan/Feb 2007.

¹¹ Dombey, Daniel & Luce, Edward. "Obama camp signals robust approach on Iran." *Financial Times*, 1 Jul 2008.

¹² Whitelaw, Kevin. "Better diplomacy through a 'League of Democracies'?" U.S. News & World Report, 30 Jun 2008.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hannay, Lord. "International Organisations: Democracies." Parliament Publications (Column 1329), 24 Jun 2008.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Howell, Lord. "International Organisations: Democracies." Parliament Publications (Column 1329-30), 24 Jun 2008.

¹⁷ Wallace, Lord. "International Organisations: Democracies." Parliament Publications (Column 1330), 24 Jun 2008.

¹⁸ Anderson, Lord. "International Organisations: Democracies." Parliament Publications (Column 1330), 24 Jun 2008.

¹⁹ Howe, Lord. "International Organisations: Democracies." Parliament Publications (Column 1330), 24 Jun 2008.

²⁰ Bach, Lord. "International Organisations: Democracies." Parliament Publications (Column 1329), 24 Jun 2008

²¹ Richter, Paul. "McCain eases proposal for alternative to U.N." *Los Angeles Times*, 21 April 2008.

²² Goldfarb, Michael. "McCain blogger call." *The Weekly Standard* blog, 20 Aug 2007.

²³ Brouwer, Melinda. "World yawns at McCain's Coalition of Democracies." *Alternet*, 2 July 2008.

²⁴ Knowlton, Brian & Broder, John M. "Bush and Brown share impatience on Iran." *The New York Times*, 19 Apr 2008.

²⁵ Richter, Paul. "McCain eases proposal for alternative to U.N." *Los Angeles Times*, 21 Apr 2008.

²⁶ Blitz, James & Stephens, Philip. "Miliband warns US Democrats over trade rhetoric." *Financial Times*, 19 May 2008.

²⁷ Rasmussen, Anders Fogh. Address to the US Chamber of Commerce. 28 February 2008.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Vinocur, John. "Germany likely to pose challenge for McCain." *International Herald Tribune*, 10 Mar 2008.

³⁰ Bruni, Frank. "Berlusconi urges support for U.S. on Iraq." *The New York Times*, 5 Dec 2003.

³¹ Ibid.

³² LaFranchi, Howard. "Why the CIA's secret flights irk Europeans." The Christian Science Monitor, 28 April 2006.

³³ Hurd, Douglas. "Letters to the editor." *Financial Times*, 16 May 2008.

³⁴ Piccone, Ted & Halperin, Morton. "A League of Democracies: Doomed to fail?" *International Herald Tribune*, 5 Jul 2008.

³⁵ Hannay, David. "League idea will not stir support." *Financial Times*, 19 May 2008.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Tharoor, Shashi. "This mini-league of nations would cause only division." *Financial Times*, 27 May 2008.