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**Democracy versus Autocracy. A bet that can go wrong***Democracy versus Autocracy. A bet that can go wrong***Abstract:**

President Biden has framed international relations in terms of a conflict between democracies and autocracies, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reaffirmed this position. However, a large part of the international community has refused to support sanctions against Russia and positions have been adopted according to the particular interests of each country.

The global south has no desire to be forced to take sides in the competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China, knowing that it is in its best interest to maintain the best possible relations with the two global powers. This is why the call to close ranks around Washington and against the world's autocracies, with the People's Republic of China in the lead, seems unrealistic.

**Key words:**

Interdependence, decoupling, pragmatism, dialogue.

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the *Analysis Papers* are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

## Democracias vs. autocracias: un órdago que puede salir mal

### Resumen:

El presidente Biden ha planteado las relaciones internacionales en los términos de un conflicto entre democracias y autocracias, y la invasión rusa de Ucrania lo ha reafirmado en esta postura. No obstante, una gran parte de la comunidad internacional se ha negado a apoyar las sanciones dictadas contra Rusia y se ha posicionado según los intereses particulares de cada país.

El sur global no quiere verse obligado a tomar partido en la competición entre los Estados Unidos y la República Popular China, consciente de que lo más conveniente es mantener las mejores relaciones posibles con las dos potencias globales. Por eso no parece realista el llamamiento a cerrar filas en torno a Washington y frente a las autocracias del mundo, con la República Popular China a la cabeza.

### Palabras clave:

Interdependencia, desacoplamiento, pragmatismo, diálogo.

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But we emerged anew in the great battle for freedom: a battle between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force.

JOE BIDEN  
Warsaw, 26 March 2022<sup>1</sup>

From its arrival at the White House, the Trump Administration made the *Great Power Competition* its priority guide for action, setting its sights primarily on the confrontation with the People's Republic of China. But sanctions, tariffs and technology bans were not limited to the Asian giant. To the cry of 'America first!' even the most traditional partners were singled out with punitive trade measures, and transatlantic allies were branded as freeloaders who abused the US security umbrella without contributing sufficiently to its funding.



<sup>1</sup> THE WHITE HOUSE. 'Remarks by President Biden on the United Efforts of the Free World to Support the People of Ukraine'. 26 March 2022. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/26/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-efforts-of-the-free-world-to-support-the-people-of-ukraine/>

President Biden's election was greeted with relief by friends and optimism by opponents. The former noted the Trumpist storm coming to an end; the latter in the belief that Washington's new leadership would be weak—which seemed to be confirmed by the chaotic withdrawal from Kabul—and easily manageable. Both were wrong. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and more specifically its failure, gave President Biden the opportunity to emerge as a tenacious leader, at least in this conflict, much to the surprise of those who had dubbed him 'sleepy Joe'. The new slogan 'America's back!' brought smiles to the faces of European capitals, but few paid attention to the fact that the US president's full sentence added a strong affirmation: "America is back, and ready to lead the world"<sup>2</sup>.

Aware that a great power like the United States—indeed, still the world's great power—cannot and should not shrink from the challenge that such a status poses, President Biden redefines the inherited great power competition as a new competition between democracies and autocracies, in general, and between the United States and the world's largest autocracies, in particular. This is clearly stated in its National Security Strategy, published in October 2022, when the invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops had already taken place: 'Democracies and autocracies are engaged in a contest to show which system of governance can best deliver for their people and for the world'<sup>3</sup>. The war has only reinforced the president's conviction that what is taking place globally is the clash between freedom and tyranny<sup>4</sup>. But at the same time, as the conflict drags on, it is becoming increasingly clear that the world is not unconditionally and unanimously aligned under US leadership and against Russia, despite the gravity of the invasion as an unacceptable breach of international legality. We need only look at the positions of the international community in successive votes in the UN General Assembly, at the small number of countries firmly engaged in supporting Ukraine and sanctions against Russia, and even at tensions within the European Union in relation to Russia.

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<sup>2</sup> MANSON, Katrina and WEAVER, Courtney. "'America is back and ready to lead the world", says Joe Biden', *Financial Times*. 24 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/e9f7fc88-7f08-43af-976c-9b164cf32ed8>

<sup>3</sup> THE WHITE HOUSE. National Security Strategy. October 2022. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> BRANDS, Hal. 'How to Make Biden's Free World Strategy Work', *Foreign Affairs*. 24 May 2022. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2022-05-24/how-make-bidens-free-world-strategy-work>

The question therefore arises as to whether this approach of democracy versus autocracy is correct or simply feasible. Many issues are difficult to resolve at the outset. Who determines what is a democracy and what is an autocracy? When is a democracy full or merely functional? Are there perverse autocracies and acceptable autocracies, according to what parameters? Depending on the laxity with which the judgement is approached, we find a range of possibilities varying from barely two dozen democracies in the world according to the most restrictive criteria, to fifty or even more than a hundred. This binary model of international relations —democracies versus autocracies, good and bad, us and them— has little chance if most of the international community does not accept it. What is more, if the majority rejects it.

### **The global south speaks out**

The many countries not part of what is usually referred to as the West (in short, NATO and EU allies and partners, and Pacific democracies) are very uncomfortable with the binary vision proposed by Washington, which does not mean that they necessarily align themselves with the China-Russia tandem. On the contrary, they prefer to maintain the best possible relations with both the United States and China, and in relation to Russia the rejection of the invasion of Ukraine is widespread, but this does not mean that they join the sanctions or that they stop making huge profits by taking advantage of these sanctions. It is also important to note that the rejection of uncritical alignment with the West is not a justification for Russian aggression, but rather that, among other reasons, many countries are wary of the reliability of democracies that during the pandemic vetoed the delivery of vaccines to third parties and abandoned Afghanistan to the Taliban after promising never to do so.

Faced with China's inevitable accession to great power status, the global south wants to avoid confrontation with Beijing. Defending its interests requires a multi-aligned approach that does not reject any partner, large or small, with which to maintain commercial, technological or security relations. Given the uncertainty over how the multipolar order will finally be reconfigured and how the *Great Power Competition* will evolve, it is prudent to play with both sides. The global south wants to continue to work with the West while continuing to do so with the People's Republic of China.

This approach is adopted by middle powers such as Turkey, Brazil, the Gulf monarchies, South Africa and Indochina. And most significantly India, whose status as the world's leading demographic power and aspiring third in the Sino-US discord enables it to play a moderating role in that discord. In a display of geopolitical girth, it is increasingly aligning with the United States and the rest of the region's democracies in the security sphere, maintaining fruitful military and trade relations with Russia despite sanctions, and even improving exchanges with China. Equal parts pragmatism and geopolitical realism.

### **In the West, opinions are divided**

China's global challenge is particularly worrying for Indo-Pacific democracies given the added factor of its unstoppable military might, always with an eye on Taiwan. The possibility of a military conflict in the region, for now remote but feasible in the not too distant future, which would inevitably affect the entire neighbourhood is leading them to both increase their military capabilities and strengthen regional security initiatives (QUAD, AUKUS, Five Eyes, FOIP, combined military exercises, etc.), in this case under US leadership, to face the challenge posed by the world's largest autocracy.

In Europe, however, the collision course with China is unwelcome and raises serious disagreements with Washington. French President Emmanuel Macron made a surprisingly strong statement after a trip to Beijing in April when he said that, on the issue of tensions in China's inland seas, "Europe must not be a 'follower' of either the US or China. The worst thing would be to think that we Europeans must be followers and adapt ourselves to the American rhythm and a Chinese overreaction"<sup>5</sup>. The EU and China do not want to see intensive mutual trade relations deteriorate unnecessarily, both because of the consequences of the prolongation of the war in Ukraine and because of the decoupling between the West and the Asian superpower.

Nor can North America afford such decoupling in an inevitably globalised and interconnected world. Not only from China but also from the rest of the international community, whether democracies or more or less acceptable autocracies. The US needs its usual partners and allies, as well as the Gulf monarchies, India, ASEAN members,

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<sup>5</sup> VILLAÉCIJA, Raquel. 'Macron pide a Europa tener una voz propia sobre Taiwán', *El Mundo*. 10 April 2023. Available at: <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2023/04/10/64342bf421efa007248b4588.html>

Africa and Latin America. It would therefore be a mistake to demand unwavering loyalties and to forget that, like it or not, the memory of recent Western colonisation in many countries of the global south provokes rejection of the former colonial powers. For this reason, President Biden has already twice convened the Summit for Democracy<sup>6</sup>, with more than 100 guests, to name but one example.

Interdependence is as inevitable as it is desirable. The dialectic of democracies versus autocracies is therefore not a pragmatic approach; it can have adverse results by exacerbating disagreements and provoking rejection. If, however, it is to be maintained as an expression of the will to defend certain Western values and principles, many nuances will have to be introduced. The first is to lower the bar when it comes to demanding democratic credentials from interlocutors with whom, in any case, it is necessary to interact and reach agreements. Some of the US president's initiatives, such as the aforementioned Summits for Democracy or the meeting with almost all African leaders in December 2022, are a step in this direction<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, the rhetoric of a head-on clash with China will have to be moderated. The latest communiqué by G7 leaders, meeting in Hiroshima in May 2023, could be a significant foretaste of this as it textually states: 'We stand prepared to build constructive and stable relations with China [...]. It is necessary to cooperate with China'<sup>8</sup>.



<sup>6</sup> U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE. 'The Summit for Democracy'. November 2022. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/summit-for-democracy/>

<sup>7</sup> U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE. 'U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit'. Washington, December 2022. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/africasummit/>

<sup>8</sup> G7, 2023 HIROSHIMA SUMMIT. 'G7 Hiroshima Leaders' Communiqué'. 20 May 2023. Available at: [https://www.g7hiroshima.go.jp/documents/pdf/Leaders\\_Communique\\_01\\_en.pdf](https://www.g7hiroshima.go.jp/documents/pdf/Leaders_Communique_01_en.pdf)

Again drawing on Hal Brands, in his article 'How to make Biden's Free World Strategy Work', published by *Foreign Affairs* in 2022<sup>9</sup>, the correct equation would be to manage the competition with the two revisionist powers, China and Russia, with a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, by consolidating the bloc of liberal democracies and, on the other, by promoting a fluid dialogue with the global south, without excluding relations of 'convenience' with autocracies such as Vietnam or the rigid Gulf monarchies.

The most difficult task will probably be to heal the wounds still open between the young states born out of the decolonisation process of the last century. Rather than traditional hard power, the West will have to resort to softer power: in the form of investments to counterbalance the huge amounts of money put by China into its Belt and Road Initiative; giving the global south a greater presence in major international organisations and forums, from UN agencies to the IMF or the WB; and with more frequent and dynamic interaction with all these countries, through sectoral summits or bilateral dialogues.

When what is at stake is the distribution of power among the various international actors and the defence of vital interests that are, by their very nature, antagonistic, throwing down the gauntlet it is not advisable unless one is absolutely certain of winning.

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<sup>9</sup> BRANDS, Hal. *Op. cit.*