



AN ALLIANCE OF DEMOCRACIES: WITH THE US OR FOR THE US?



By Sven Biscop (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/sven-biscop/>) (27 July 2020)

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US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has called for an “a new grouping of like-minded nations, a new alliance of democracies” against China. The US has raised this idea before: in 2003, when it could not get its way from the UN Security Council, as an alternative format that could legitimise the invasion of Iraq.

Today, Washington is dissatisfied with the less than enthusiastic response of its NATO allies to its endeavour to shift the focus of the Alliance to China. For the European members of NATO, its raison d'être remains the deterrence of Russia. For the EU, which has been forging its own China strategy, the Trump administration has little sympathy anyway. In the light of China's growing influence, Europe's concern for its sovereignty has grown, but at the same time the EU has carefully distinguished itself from a US strategy that is seen as too confrontational.

By bringing together its European and Asian allies in a new “alliance of democracies” under American leadership, the US can hope to bring them into line with its own China strategy. Such a move would, however, be a further step towards dividing the world in two rival blocs, which is exactly what the EU should try to avoid. A new cold war, i.e. a mutual decoupling of the economies and systematically working against every initiative of the other side, would paralyse international politics and push the global economy into an even deeper recession than the coronavirus is already causing.

Just like in the Cold War, Europe would be a secondary actor to the US, but now in a

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secondary theatre, for the main act would now play out in Asia rather than in Europe. European and American interests greatly overlap, but they are not identical. The EU cannot trust the US to take care of Europe's economic interests. More fundamentally, since the US

wants to remain the undisputed number one, for Washington the rise of China is a problem per se. Not so for the EU: if, and only if, China respects the basic rules of the world order, Europe can live with the fact that China is a great power again.

An “alliance of democracies”, therefore, would not really be an alliance *with* the US – it would be an alliance *for* the US, to further the American interest, to which the interests of its allies would inevitably end up being subordinated. If the US really cares about bringing its allies on board, it should more sincerely consult them in the existing frameworks, such as NATO, rather than imposing its agenda. Washington should work with key players such as the EU, and build a common agenda, rather than using tariffs to try and force it into line.

If a new format is needed, it should be one that cuts across existing divides. Much more promising than an “alliance of democracies” is the Alliance for Multilateralism that France and Germany announced at the 2019 UN General Assembly. This is a network rather than an organisation, which seeks to build ad hoc coalitions on specific issues, with the overall aim of preserving international rules. A good example of how such flexible diplomacy can work was the creation of a temporary mechanism to replace the WTO appellate body, which was blocked by the US, by a group comprising the EU, China, and fourteen other WTO members, in March 2020. The aim, indeed, is not to unite against China or anybody else, but to pull in China and others, and convince them that their political stability, economic prosperity, and security too depend on the rules-based order.

A lot depends on China’s behaviour, of course. China is an authoritarian state, and it is a great power. The EU and the US have to speak up for human rights, and must therefore criticise China’s violation of the principle of “one country, two systems” in Hongkong, and its horrible treatment of the Uighur population in Xinjiang. But because China is a great power, Europe and America speak out in the knowledge that they have little leverage.

More importantly, even if China were to become a democracy tomorrow, it would still be a great power, pursuing global interests. A democratic China would not likely drop its claims to the South China Sea, abandon the Belt and Road Initiative, or stop its influence operations in Europe and other places. That is what directly affects the European and American interest, and what they should push back against when China violates the rules-based order.

The EU and the US must uphold the discourse of human rights, but they should actively use their political, economic, and military power to engage China in international politics rather than domestic politics. China will not change its internal policies, even if Europeans and Americans would decouple their economies, for in the eyes of the Chinese regime, its vital interests are at stake. The Soviet Union never changed its internal policies under western pressure either. But in international politics, the EU and the US together have leverage. Not by simplistically launching a new cold war from which everyone would lose, but by smartly pushing back against China when they must, while working with China when they can.

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Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop lectures at Ghent University and directs the Europe in the World programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels.


EGMONT


Royal Institute for International Relations
Rue des Petits Carmes 24A
1000 Brussels - BELGIUM

POSTAL ADDRESS

Rue des Petits Carmes 15
1000 Brussels - BELGIUM

CONTACT

 +32 (0)2 223 41 14

 info@egmontinstitute.be (mailto:info@egmontinstitute.be)

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