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**Analyzing the “Democracy vs. Autocracy”  
Advocacy of the Biden Administration in the  
Upcoming US-China Great Power  
Competition from the Perspective of National  
Interest**

**Trystanto Sanjaya\***

**Abstract**

*The deterioration of US-China relations since the Trump Administration has little signs of coming back to the status quo ante. Since coming to office in January 2021, President Biden has shown little willingness to roll back some of the punitive measures applied under the previous administration. Instead of focusing primarily on cooperation with China, US President Joe Biden has shown rhetoric of great power competition. To back up his competition strategy, Biden has used the “Democracy vs. Autocracy” advocacy to rally US democratic allies to confront*

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\* Trystanto Sanjaya is an undergraduate student of international relations at Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and an exchange student at the Institut d'Études Politique de Paris (Sciences Po) in France in 2023. He could be reached at [trystantos@gmail.com](mailto:trystantos@gmail.com) or [trystanto@mail.ugm.ac.id](mailto:trystanto@mail.ugm.ac.id). The views expressed in this article are his own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of International Relations, Gadjah Mada University, Sciences Po, or the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia chapter Universitas Gadjah Mada.

*the growing might of the Chinese power. It implies that democratic countries worldwide and the US have a common interest in combating the rise of autocracies, which implicitly means Russia and China. However, by analyzing this advocacy from the perspective of national interests, I argue that this characterization heavily oversimplifies the interests of democratic countries worldwide and disregards the notion that governments have their respective national interests. Additionally, it does not consider the fact that the interests of some authoritarian regimes could align with the US, and it could also invigorate autocracies worldwide to unite and cooperate against the US.*

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**Keywords:** Democracy vs. Autocracy, Biden Administration Foreign Policy Strategy, US-China Competition, Democratic Camp, US Allies

## Introduction

Since the Trump administration first imposed tariffs on Chinese imports in early 2018, the relationship between the US and China has deteriorated. The rhetoric of peaceful cooperation is largely gone, and the rhetoric of competition and confrontation has entered the public discourse. The relationship worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic when President Trump named the SARS-CoV-2 virus<sup>1</sup> “China virus,”<sup>2</sup> and members of the Trump administration alleged that the SARS-CoV-2 virus leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan.<sup>3</sup>

Despite several Chinese hopes that the Biden Administration will reverse some of the harsh measures imposed by the Trump Administration upon China,<sup>4</sup> those hopes have been dashed. On the campaign trail, Biden argued on *Foreign Affairs* that “the US

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<sup>1</sup> The SARS-CoV-2 is the virus that caused the COVID-19 disease. See “Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19).” World Health Organization, accessed October 2022. [https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1).

<sup>2</sup> Mishal Reja. “Trump’s ‘Chinese Virus’ Tweet Helped Lead to Rise in Racist Anti-Asian Twitter Content: Study,” *ABC News*, March 18, (2021). <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/trumps-chinese-virus-tweet-helped-lead-rise-racist/story?id=76530148>.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Kahl and Thomas Wright. *Aftershocks: Pandemic Politics and the End of the Old International Order*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, (2021): 139.

<sup>4</sup> “China Urges US to Lift Trade Restrictions, Stop Interference,” *Associated Press*, May 15, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-donald-trump-beijing-global-trade-tibet-a9038d1fea6606a3d52e96a12a9e4ca2>.

does need to get tough on China.”<sup>5</sup> During a speech in front of a joint session of the US Congress in late April 2021, President Biden affirmed that the United States is “...in competition with China and other countries to win the 21st Century.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently, President Biden has shown that he is willing to continue the policies of the Trump Administration in confronting and competing with China. As John Mearsheimer aptly put it, “[t]oday, China and the United States are locked in what can only be called a new cold war.”<sup>7</sup>

To back up this pledge, President Biden has embraced the concept that the US and her allies are in a competition against the world’s autocracies, implicitly pointing fingers at China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and other unfriendly authoritarian regimes. President Biden affirmed that in his speech to a joint session of the US Congress in April 2021:

“If [all Americans do their part], we will meet the central challenge of the age by proving that democracy is durable and strong. Autocrats will not win the future. We will. America will. And

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph R. Biden, Jr. “Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy after Trump.” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 2 (2020): 70.

<sup>6</sup> “Remarks by President Biden in Address to a Joint Session of Congress.” The White House, April 29, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/29/remarks-by-president-biden-in-address-to-a-joint-session-of-congress/>.

<sup>7</sup> John J Mearsheimer. “The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great Power Politics,” *Foreign Affairs*, 100, no. 6 (2021): 48.

the future belongs to America.”<sup>8</sup>

Biden has taken several steps to implement this foreign policy strategy to make good on this promise. One of the most high-profile ones is the Summit for Democracy which was held in December 2021 to “[spur] dialogue and [initiate] concrete action toward global democratic renewal,”<sup>9</sup> according to a press statement released by the White House. Many experts argued that the real purpose of the Summit for Democracy is to persuade and rally democracies around the world to contain China.<sup>10</sup> Unsurprisingly, China reacted negatively to the summit and argued that the US “attempted to preserve its hegemony over the world and undermine the international system with the United Nations at its core and the international order underpinned by

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<sup>8</sup> The White House. “Remarks by President Biden in Address to a Joint Session of Congress.”

<sup>9</sup> “Summit for Democracy Summary of Proceedings.” The White House, December 23, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/23/summit-for-democracy-summary-of-proceedings/>.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, James Goldgeier and Bruce Jentleson. “A Democracy Summit Is Not What the Doctor Ordered,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 14, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-12-14/democracy-summit-not-wh-at-doctor-ordered> and Stephen M. Walt. “Biden’s Democracy Summit Could Backfire,” *Foreign Policy*, December 8, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/08/bidens-democracy-summit-could-backfire/>.

international law.”<sup>11</sup>

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Biden doubled his advocacy. In his first State of the Union address on March 2022, Biden argued that “[i]n the battle between democracy and autocracies, democracies are rising to the moment, and the world is clearly choosing the side of peace and security.”<sup>12</sup> In the same address, President Biden also used the ‘democracy vs. autocracy’ foreign strategy to make a case for a massive infrastructure budget proposal to “...transform America and put us on a path to win the economic competition of the 21st Century that we face with the rest of the world—*particularly with China* [emphasis added].” Additionally, in the 2022 US Indo-Pacific Strategy, the Biden administration also focused heavily on the need to support democracies in the region to advance a “free and open” Indo-Pacific.<sup>13</sup> It seems that there is already a solid political consensus among the US foreign policy elite that the new ‘democracy vs. autocracy’ conceptualization is

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<sup>11</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson’s Statement on the ‘Summit for Democracy’ Held by the United States.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. December 11, 2021. [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2535\\_665405/202112/t20211211\\_10466939.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/202112/t20211211_10466939.html).

<sup>12</sup> Joseph R. Biden, Jr. “Remarks of President Joe Biden – State of the Union Address as Prepared for Delivery.” The White House, March 1, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2022/>.

<sup>13</sup> “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States.” The White House, February 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

the correct strategy for the United States in navigating through the upcoming US-China great power competition.

However, this paper will argue otherwise and attempt to analyze the “democracy vs. autocracy” strategy from the concept of national interests. Although it is received favorably in the White House and Capitol Hill, the “democracy vs. autocracy” heavily oversimplifies countries’ interests worldwide. It disregards the notion that other countries may have their national interests that may not follow the US’. Far from giving the US solidarity in the democratic camp in competing against China, this strategy could limit the number of states that the US could enlist in competing against China. Instead of giving the US a leadership role in the democratic camp, this advocacy will blind the US into believing that the democratic camp has a common interest in confronting China. In reality, democratic countries could have different national interests from the US. Instead of making it easy to divide and conquer its enemies, this advocacy could unite them and disregard the notion that authoritarian countries can share the US’ interests. Worse, the US could open itself up to attacks regarding its hypocrisy as the United States still supports some Western-friendly autocracies around the world.

This article will proceed as follows. Firstly, this paper will explain why the “democracy vs. autocracy” advocacy could tie the hands of the US and limit the number of partners it can enlist in competing against China. Secondly, this paper will delve into



the reasons many democracies around the world have different views than the US regarding China. Next, this paper will explain the US’ support for many illiberal and authoritarian regimes, especially during the Cold War. The penultimate section will explain how the autocratic world could unite against the West despite their internal conflict due to this advocacy. Finally, the last section will conclude this article.

### **I. Handcuffing the US’ Hands in a Great Power Competition**

Firstly, will the strategy give the US a range of tools to confront China's growing assertiveness on the world stage? Far from giving the US a full range of countries to enlist to counter China, this advocacy could tie its hands as the US could find it challenging to work with authoritarian governments that share the US’ aspirations and concerns about China.<sup>14</sup>

There are at least 13 countries in the Indo-Pacific region that are mentioned in the 2022 US Indo-Pacific strategy as crucial American partners, either as US allies or as “regional partners”: Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan,

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<sup>14</sup> See Stephen M. Walt. *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, (2018): 76-9.

and Vietnam.<sup>15</sup> The United States must work with these countries to gain a competitive edge over China and restrain China's aggressive moves.

However, the 'democracy vs. autocracy' advocacy will make it extremely difficult for the United States to work with some of the countries mentioned. Some are autocracies, hybrid regimes, or are in a democratic decline. To put that clearly, Chart 1 has tracked the 11 countries' democracy scores according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index. The Democracy Index is specifically chosen as it considers all the substantive, deliberative, and procedural aspects of democracy.<sup>16</sup> In other words, it considers the protection of rights, representation and participation of the people, and the functioning of the government. The Democracy Index considers countries that receive a score of less or equal to 4 as authoritarian regimes, 4-6 as hybrid regimes, 6-8 as flawed democracies, and more than 8 as full democracies.

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<sup>15</sup> The White House. "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States." 9.

<sup>16</sup> For a full explanation of the methodology, see Economist Intelligence Unit. "Democracy Index 2021: The China Challenge." London: Economist Intelligence Unit, (2022): 67-79.

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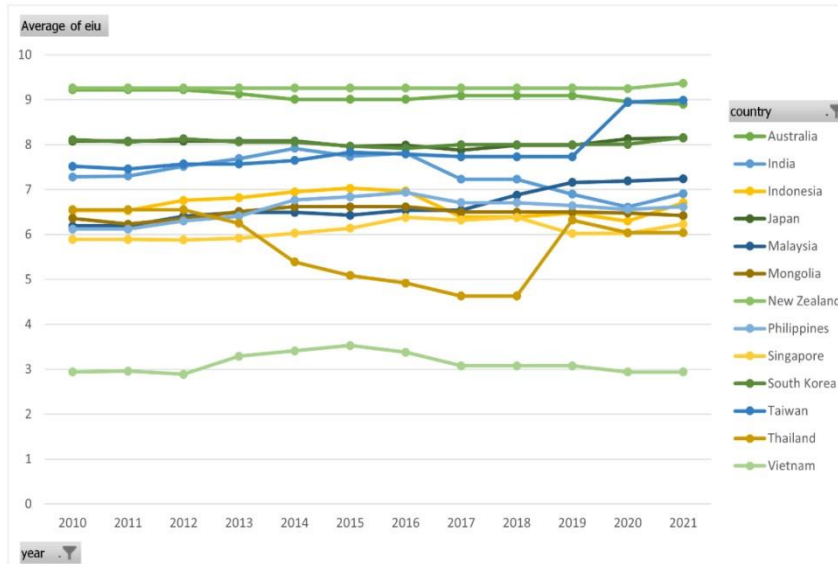


Figure 1: Democracy Score of the 13 Countries Mentioned in the 2022 US Indo-Pacific Strategy as US Treaty Allies and “Regional Partners.” Source: Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index.

As one can see from the chart above, according to the Democracy Index, Vietnam was classified as an authoritarian regime in 2021. Thailand was classified as a hybrid regime from 2014 until 2018, before its score skyrocketed in 2019, and it is categorized in the “flawed democracy” category. Only five countries mentioned in the Indo-Pacific strategy are full democracies in 2021: Australia, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and New Zealand. The rest mostly fall into the ‘flawed democracy’ category. Additionally, the US will have fewer countries to enlist

in its competition against China if countries experiencing democratic decline are left out. India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand have been experiencing a reduction in their democracy scores in recent years. All these countries are critical for the upcoming US-China great power competition as India is a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Indonesia is located strategically between the Pacific and Indian Oceans as well as located at the entrance of the South China Sea, the Philippines is a US treaty ally, and Thailand is a traditionally close US partner in the region.

Beyond the critical countries in the Indo-Pacific, the US would also have difficulties searching for democratic allies worldwide as the world is experiencing a democratic decline. Chart 2 tracks the world democracy score from 2010 until 2021:

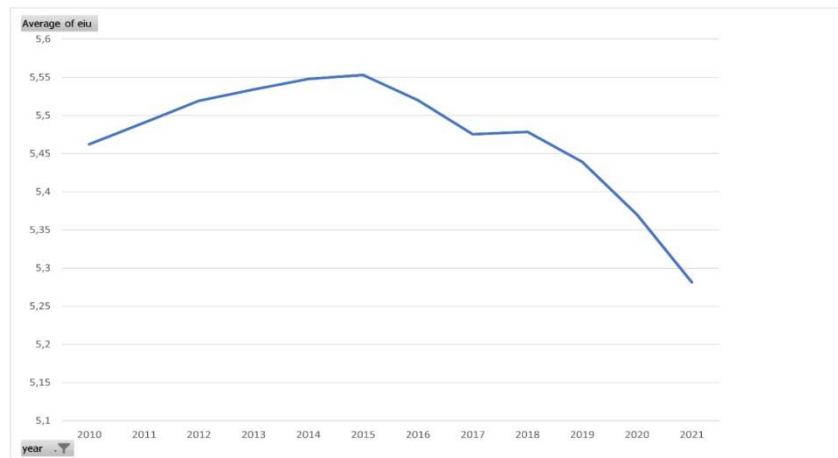


Figure 2: Average World Democracy Index Score 2010-2021.  
Source: Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index.

As Chart 2 clearly shows, the world reached the peak of democratization in 2015, and its score has declined from 5.55 in 2015 to 5.27 in 2021. Considering this fact, if the US continues to use the “democracy vs. autocracy” characterization, it would be tough to enlist authoritarian regimes, hybrid regimes, and countries experiencing democratic decline around the world as friends and allies in the upcoming great power competition.

Vietnam is a case in point. According to the Democracy Index in Chart 1, it is classified as an authoritarian regime. The Communist Party of Vietnam rules it as a one-party state.<sup>17</sup> Of course, it does not fit the US conception of a full-fledged democracy. However, it does share the US’ aspirations to confront China on several issues, such as the South China Sea. Additionally, according to the Pew Research Center, an overwhelming majority of Vietnamese (76%) had a favorable opinion of the United States in 2015.<sup>18</sup> In 2017, the last year available in the data on Vietnamese’s favorability survey towards the US, 85% of

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<sup>17</sup> “The Political System in Vietnam,” in *The Vietnamese Health Care System in Change: A Policy Network Analysis of a Southeast Asian Welfare Regime*. Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, (2012).

<sup>18</sup> Kat Devlin. “40 Years after Fall of Saigon, Vietnamese See U.S. As Key Ally.” Pew Research Center, April 30, 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/30/vietnamese-see-u-s-as-key-ally/>.

Vietnamese surveyed expressed a favorable view towards the US.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, this feeling is reinforced by the Chinese occupation of Vietnam for centuries<sup>20</sup> and the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979.

However, it is not difficult to imagine why Vietnam could hesitate to join the “democracy vs. autocracy” crusade as it could be categorized as an autocracy, at least by the US. Additionally, it could also limit the extent of US-Vietnam cooperation, as why would the US cooperate with an autocracy when it is in a battle between democracy and autocracy? As will be discussed in the upcoming arguments, it could open the US to attacks on its hypocrisy and double standards as the US has always cooperated with authoritarian regimes all the time if it suits US interests and even subverted democracy in foreign countries when the US does not favor the outcome of the democratic process.

Of course, the US needs all the hands it can get in this upcoming great-power competition. Limiting the number of countries, it can enlist in its competition against China does not help the United States gain the upper hand.

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<sup>19</sup> “What Do Vietnamese Think about America?” *Vietnam Daily*, January 17, 2022.

<https://vietnamdaily.ca/culture/what-do-vietnamese-think-about-america-2022/>.

<sup>20</sup> Dien Luong. “Vietnamese Love the US, and China Cannot Change That,” *Nikkei Asia*, September 13, 2021. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Vietnamese-love-the-US-and-China-cannot-change-that>.

## II. (Not Necessarily) A Common Interest of the Democratic World

Secondly, do democratic countries worldwide have a common interest in confronting China? The short answer is no. While the United States tries to frame this great power competition as a struggle between the democratic and the autocratic world, it is undeniable that many democratic countries, especially developing ones, have interests in their relations with China. The democratic nations of the world are not a monolithic entity united in their struggle against world autocracy. They have interests that are tailor-made according to their individual needs.

It is essential to note that not all democracies get along well, even when they are interested in countering China’s aggressiveness. South Korea and Japan are excellent examples. Both are US treaty allies, and the United States is obliged to assist in their defense if they are attacked. However, their bilateral relations are not as warm as one might expect. Due to the Japanese colonial history in South Korea, the two countries’ relations could get intense at any moment, especially around the issue of Korean comfort women Japan took to support the Japanese war effort during World War 2.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the United States may have difficulties coordinating the actions of the

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<sup>21</sup> Richard McGregor. *Asia’s Reckoning: China, Japan, and the Fate of US Power in the Pacific Century*. London: Penguin Books, (2018): 62.

Japanese and the South Koreans as they may be reluctant to work together due to their historical dispute. One evidence of this is South Korea's absence from the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), an informal group made up of Japan, India, Australia, and the United States that many suspects have a purpose of containing China. Some experts believe South Korea's absence from the Quad is due to its unwillingness to work with Japan closely.<sup>22</sup>

Other democracies, meanwhile, want to focus on their own development goals and needs and are ready to cooperate with China to fulfill their development needs. While these countries may have reservations about the growing might of the Chinese power, they do not consider the Chinese ideology and autocracy as a particular threat.<sup>23</sup> Indonesia is a case in point. It has cooperated with China on many development projects, especially with China's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>24</sup> In 2019, China overtook Japan as Indonesia's second-largest foreign investor (the largest

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<sup>22</sup> Tom Corben. "South Korea and the Quad: Missing out or Opting Out?" *The Diplomat*, December 23, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/south-korea-and-the-quad-missing-out-or-opting-out/>.

<sup>23</sup> Kishore Mahbubani. *Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy*. New York: PublicAffairs, (2020): 270.

<sup>24</sup> "China Invests in Indonesia's Infrastructure Sector." Oxford Business Group, 2020, <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/analysis/linking-investment-china-set-make-sizeable-portion-infrastructure-spending>.



foreign investor being Singapore).<sup>25</sup> However, the actual amount of Chinese investments could be higher as some Chinese investments to Indonesia are routed through Singapore, resulting in a statistical distortion.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, however, Indonesia has some reservations regarding the growing might of the Chinese power, especially given that China claimed a significant size of Indonesia’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around the Natuna Islands through its nine-dash line claim. In late 2021, for example, China filed a formal complaint to Indonesia regarding Indonesia’s natural resource extraction activities inside Indonesia’s legal EEZ.<sup>27</sup> Chinese maritime militia and coast guard vessels continued to intrude on Indonesia’s EEZ and territorial waters in September 2022.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “Top 10 Foreign Direct Investors in Indonesia over the Past 5 Years in Million US Dollars – Indonesia Economic Forum.” Indonesia Economic Forum, 2020.

<https://www.indonesiaeconomicforum.com/top-10-foreign-direct-investors-in-indonesia-over-the-past-5-years-in-million-us-dollars/>.

<sup>26</sup> Shaofeng Chen. “Regional Responses to China’s Maritime Silk Road Initiative in Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 111 (2017): 352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1410960>.

<sup>27</sup> Tom Allard, Kate Lamb, and Agustinus Beo Da Costa. “Exclusive: China Protested Indonesian Drilling, Military Exercises,” *Reuters*, December 1, 2021, sec. Asia Pacific. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/exclusive-china-protested-indonesian-drilling-military-exercises-2021-12-01/>.

<sup>28</sup> Pandu Wiyoga. “Kehadiran Kapal China Terkonsentrasi Di Timur Laut Natuna [Presence of Chinese Ships Concentrated in Eastern Natuna Sea].” *Kompas*, September 14, 2022. <https://www.kompas.id/baca/nusantara/2022/09/14/kehadiran-kapal-china-terkonsentrasi-di-timur-laut-natuna>.

Consequently, Indonesia is also improving its security and military relations with the United States.<sup>29</sup> In 2022, for example, Indonesia and the US invited other countries to join the ‘Garuda Shield’ military exercise.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the US State Department has approved Indonesia’s proposal to buy dozens of F-15 Advanced Eagle fighter jets.<sup>31</sup> These military outreaches prove that, even though Indonesia has some reservations and fears about the growing might of the Chinese military power in the region, it does not consider Chinese ideology and autocracy a threat. Consequently, it is willing to work with China on development issues. Therefore, the US also needs to realize that, while countries may have trepidations regarding Chinese aggressivity, they may not consider Chinese authoritarianism a threat.

Additionally, the US needs to realize that while some democracies are willing to work with it to confront China, their stances may differ from the US on other issues with which they

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<sup>29</sup> Niniek Karmini. “US, Indonesia Hold Joint Military Drills amid China Concerns,” *The Diplomat*, August 4, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/us-indonesia-hold-joint-military-drills-amid-china-concerns/>.

<sup>30</sup> Karmini. “US, Indonesia Hold Joint Military Drills amid China Concerns.”

<sup>31</sup> Gareth Jennings. “US Approves F-15 Sale to Indonesia.” *Janes*, February 11, 2022. <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/us-approves-f-15-sale-to-indonesia>.

have little to no relations. India is a case in point.<sup>32</sup> It shares the US’ aspirations to confront China due to India’s ongoing dispute with China. Consequently, it makes sense for India to join the US-led Quad to contain China’s aggressivity.<sup>33</sup> However, on other issues, India appears to have a different stance than the US. India’s response to the war in Ukraine is a case in point. President Biden likened the war in Ukraine to a battle between the democracies and autocracies of the world and put Russia in the same category as China. Despite this and the many calls from the West for India to condemn Russia, India hesitated to do so<sup>34</sup> as it has close defense and political relations with Russia. Consequently, the US must realize that, while some democracies around the Indo-Pacific are interested in countering China, they may not be willing to share the same stance with the US on other issues.

Other democracies could refuse to participate in the

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<sup>32</sup> For full explanation see Trystanto, Alfin Febrian Basundoro, and Muhammad Irsyad Abrar. “Assessing the Response of the Global South to Russo-Ukrainian War: Case Study of India.” *Proceeding of Go South 2022 Annual Convention on the Global South - Transcending the North-South Divide?: G20 and Multilateralism in Turbulent Global Politics*, 2023 (forthcoming as of the writing of this article).

<sup>33</sup> Ed Griffith and Moises de Souza. “The Quad: US Efforts to Counter China’s Influence in Asia Mark a New Era of Micro Alliances.” *The Conversation*, June 1, 2022. <https://theconversation.com/the-quad-us-efforts-to-counter-chinas-influence-in-asia-mark-a-new-era-of-micro-alliances-183956>.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Kugelman. “Russia Still Looms over U.S.-India Relationship,” *Foreign Policy*, April 14, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/14/us-india-relationship-russia-ukraine-war/>.

US-China great power competition and wish to remain on the sidelines. European countries are perfect examples. They are democracies. Yet, due to the geographical distance between China and Europe, European countries may have less trepidation regarding the growing might of Chinese power and, consequently, do not see the need for joining the US-led balancing coalition against China.<sup>35</sup> However, given the Chinese tacit support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, European countries are beginning to change course and start paying closer relations to the growing Chinese aggressivity.<sup>36</sup>

To conclude this section, as explained, democracies are not a monolithic entity. They all have their interests that are tailor-suited to fulfill their national needs. Therefore, some democracies may share the same stance with the US on some issues while diverging from the US on other issues. In other words, the US cannot expect democracies worldwide to stand with it on all matters concerning the battle between democracy and autocracy. Democratic countries worldwide have their threat perceptions and may not see Chinese authoritarianism as a particular threat. Additionally, other democracies may not feel

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<sup>35</sup> Stephen M. Walt. "Will Europe Ever Really Confront China?" *Foreign Policy*, October 15, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/15/will-europe-ever-really-confront-china/>.

<sup>36</sup> "China's Place on the NATO Agenda." International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2021. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2021/china-on-the-nato-agenda>.

threatened by the growing Chinese power. They could be hesitant to join the US-led coalition against China as it could jeopardize their economic relations with China.

### **III. The US’ Relations between Authoritarian and Illiberal Regimes**

This section will discuss the convergence of US interests and the interests of authoritarian regimes. Logically speaking, if this is a battle between democracy and autocracy, the US should have shunned all world dictatorships and not supported the ruling elites in all authoritarian states. Logically, the US should cooperate only with democracies worldwide and leave all autocracies out in the cold. Despite this, relevant historical and contemporary evidence proves that the US, despite its hostile rhetoric towards autocracies, still maintains friendly relations with many autocracies when such a course of action suits US interests.

First, why would the US even cooperate with autocracies in the first place despite its hostile rhetoric towards autocracies? The answer lies in one of the most fundamental assumptions of international relations: states will always prioritize what they perceive as their national interests. Normative interests or interests in promoting an ideology or value will always come second after guaranteeing state survival and security.<sup>37</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>37</sup> John J Mearsheimer. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, (2014): 43.

if cooperation with an autocracy is crucial in achieving US national interests, these considerations will come first, and ideological and normative considerations will come second (if at all). Additionally, if the goal of achieving national interest and spreading values conflicts, the former will prevail.

Before explaining the US contemporary conduct in maintaining friendly relations with autocracies worldwide, it is also essential to look at the US support for dictatorships and illiberal regimes during the Cold War. Despite President Truman's pledge that the US would "...support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures"<sup>38</sup>, the US supported many dictatorships when it suited its interests and even subverted democratic principles abroad when the outcome of the democratic process is not favorable to the US.

For example, in Indonesia, during the presidency of President Suharto from 1967-1998,<sup>39</sup> the US supported President Suharto in massacring suspected Communists after a failed 1965 *coup d'état* that many suspected was being carried out by the

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<sup>38</sup> Harry Truman. "Address of the President to Congress, Recommending Assistance to Greece and Turkey | Harry S. Truman." Harry S. Truman Library, accessed October 2022. <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/address-president-congress-recommending-assistance-greece-and-turkey>.

<sup>39</sup> Like many Indonesians, President Suharto officially only goes with one word in his name. People with a one-word name are common in Indonesia.

Indonesian Communist Party.<sup>40</sup> For the next three decades until the end of the Cold War, the US supported the Suharto regime through various economic, political, and military means even when the Suharto regime committed many cases of human rights abuse.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, the US supported Indonesia in invading East Timor in 1975, leading to nearly three decades of brutal occupation.<sup>42</sup> In another example, in 1973, the US even subverted democracy in Chile after the Chilean people elected the left-leaning Salvador Allende as president. The US was afraid of a warming of relations between Chile and the Soviet Union.<sup>43</sup> A quote widely attributed to former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger best captured the reasoning behind the US involvement in the 1973 Chilean *coup d'état*:

“I don’t see why we need to stand by and watch a

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<sup>40</sup> Vincent Bevins. “What the United States Did in Indonesia.” *The Atlantic*, October 20, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/the-indonesia-documents-and-the-us-agenda/543534/>.

<sup>41</sup> See “Indonesia: National Security and Human Rights Background.” *Rights and Security International*, October 7, 2021. 3-4. <https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/action/research/entry/indonesia-national-security-and-human-rights-background>.

<sup>42</sup> Colum Lynch. “Report: U.S. Arms Helped Indonesia Attack East Timor,” *Washington Post*, January 25, 2006, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2006/01/25/report-us-arms-helped-indonesia-attack-east-timor/5d678269-f8a5-4559-a519-32fc49a91d91/>.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Winn. “The Furies of the Andes,” in *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America’s Long Cold War*, ed. Greg Gandin and Gilbert M. Joseph. Durham: Duke University Press, (2010): 270-2. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1220mcj.10>.

country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its people. The issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for themselves.”<sup>44</sup>

One could argue that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold war, the United States no longer supported dictatorships. Instead, the United States embraced liberal hegemony that seeks to spread the values of democracy, human rights, and the free market abroad.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, the United States would require its allies and partners to “... abide by minimum humanitarian standards...” and respect human rights.<sup>46</sup> However, relevant contemporary evidence will shed doubt upon these claims. Instead of cutting off all support for autocratic and illiberal regimes, the US still support authoritarian regimes around the world politically and economically and still sells them weapons that are sometimes used in their wars.

To prove that the US still supports autocratic and illiberal regimes around the world, Chart 3 shows the top 20 customers of US arms exports in 2021 according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI):

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Saul Landau. “September, the Cruellest Month in Chile.” *Transnational Institute*, September 20, 2007. <https://www.tni.org/es/node/13324>.

<sup>45</sup> John J Mearsheimer. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven: Yale University Press, (2018), 3-5.

<sup>46</sup> Hal Brands et al. “Should America Retrench? The Battle over Offshore Balancing,” *Foreign Affairs*, 95, no. 6 (2016): 168.



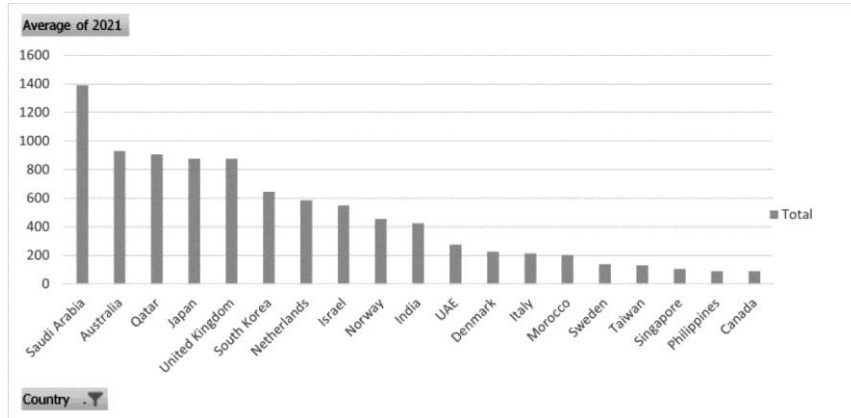


Chart 3: Arms Purchases of the Top 20 US Arms Customers in 2021 (In Millions of Dollars). Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

As seen above, Saudi Arabia is the biggest customer of US arms exports, totaling nearly 1,4 billion dollars in 2021, followed by Australia, Qatar, Japan, and the United Kingdom. It is also glaring that Saudi Arabia is the only state whose purchase of US arms totaled more than 1 billion dollars.

While Chart 3 is innocuous enough, one can see the problem with the US commitment to fighting autocracies in Chart 4. Chart 4 tracks the democracy score of the top 20 US arms customers from 2010-2021 according to the Democracy Index, published by the Economist Intelligence Unit:

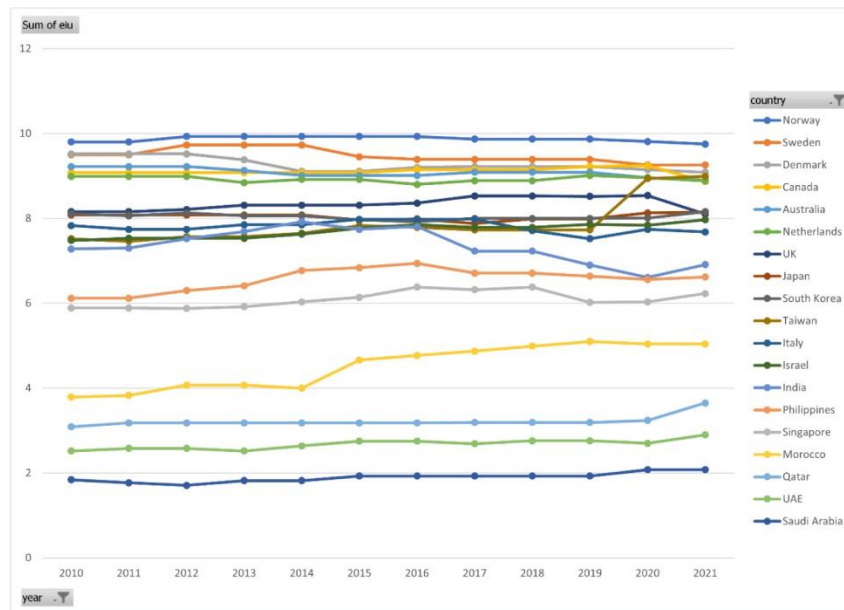


Chart 4: Democracy Score from 2010-2021 of the Top 20 US Arms Customers in 2021. Source: Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index.

As can be inferred from Chart 4, 4 of the top 20 US arms customers are either authoritarian or hybrid regimes: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Morocco. India, Israel, Italy, and the Philippines are flawed democracies. Additionally, some are experiencing democratic declines, such as in India and the Philippines. Hence, only half of the top 20 US arms customers are

classified as full democracies.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore, the argument that the United States requires its allies to respect human rights and democratic norms is invalid. If true, the United States should stop selling arms to autocracies. Instead, it continues to sell arms to several autocracies when such a course of action suits US interests. Saudi Arabia is a case in point. In 2021, as can be inferred from Chart 3, Saudi Arabia is the largest customer of US arms, with nearly \$1,6 billion in arms purchases. However, as Chart 4 already illustrates, Saudi Arabia is far from a democracy. It is an authoritarian and absolute monarchy with minimal separation of powers and frequently silences its critics. In 2018, for example, the Saudi intelligence service dismembered and assassinated Jamal Khashoggi, a *Washington Post* columnist critical of Saudi Arabia, inside the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul.<sup>48</sup> Worse, Saudi Arabia and its allies (United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, and Jordan) have been using US arms to conduct wars that violate many international humanitarian laws in Yemen.<sup>49</sup> In 2018, for

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<sup>47</sup> It is also worth noting that the United States is *not* a full democracy, but a flawed democracy, according to the *Democracy Index*

<sup>48</sup> “Saudi Arabia: Provide Justice for Khashoggi Killing.” Human Rights Watch, October 2, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/02/saudi-arabia-provide-justice-khashoggi-killing>.

<sup>49</sup> “Yemen: A Pandemic of Impunity in a Tortured Land.” Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, September 28, 2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GE-E-Yemen/2020-09-09-report.pdf>.

example, Saudi Arabia used a US-made bomb to attack a busy street and kill 40 children on a school bus.<sup>50</sup> However, as can be inferred from Chart 3, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are among the top 20 US arms customers in 2021. This means that the US does not respond to the Saudi Arabian and Emirati violations of international human rights norms in Yemen by reducing its arms sales to both countries.

Additionally, such “democracy vs. autocracy” advocacy makes it difficult for the US to change course and work with autocracies when such cooperation is desperately needed. An event of worldwide significance could oblige the US to work with autocracies,<sup>51</sup> such as a global energy crisis. Such cooperation would be difficult to sustain if the US first rhetorically or politically attacked such autocracies. For example, on the campaign trail, Biden stated that he would make Saudi Arabia a “pariah” if elected.<sup>52</sup> After the global energy crisis caused by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Biden had little choice other than to visit Saudi Arabia to persuade the kingdom to increase oil production and halt the global price of oil from increasing

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<sup>50</sup> Julian Borger. “US Supplied Bomb That Killed 40 Children on Yemen School Bus,” *The Guardian*, August 20, (2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/19/us-supplied-bomb-that-killed-40-children-school-bus-yemen>.

<sup>51</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, 156

<sup>52</sup> Alex Emmons, Aída Chávez, and Akela Lacy. “At Debate, Joe Biden Says He Would Make Saudi Arabia a ‘Pariah.’” *The Intercept*, November 21, 2019. <https://theintercept.com/2019/11/21/democratic-debate-joe-biden-saudi-arabia/>.

further.<sup>53</sup> Of course, this visit put the Biden Administration in a bad light – both inside and outside the US – as it has to abandon its prior commitments to make Saudi Arabia a “pariah.”<sup>54</sup> The visit once again proves that when matters of national interest conflict with ideological and normative issues, the former will hold sway. As a *New York Times* article rightly puts it, “[t]he visit represents the triumph of realpolitik over moral outrage...”<sup>55</sup>

Of course, this could open the US to attacks on its hypocrisy and double standards. Far from fighting against all autocracies, the US instead allies itself and cooperates with autocracies when it suits US interests.<sup>56</sup> American nemesis worldwide would have a potent rhetorical argument in counter-attacking the US narrative of its ‘democracy vs. autocracy’ claim. Samuel Huntington, in his seminal *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, perfectly encapsulates the issue:

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<sup>53</sup> Peter Baker and Ben Hubbard. “Biden to Travel to Saudi Arabia, Ending Its ‘Pariah’ Status,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 2022, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/02/us/politics/biden-saudi-arabia.html>.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Shadi Hamid. “Middle Eastern Autocrats Embarrassed Biden at Will.” Brookings Institution, July 22, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/07/22/middle-eastern-autocrats-embarrassed-biden-at-will/> and Adam Coogle. “The Human Rights Price of Biden’s Visit to Jeddah.” Human Rights Watch, July 22, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/22/human-rights-price-bidens-visit-jeddah>.

<sup>55</sup> Baker and Hubbard, “Biden to Travel to Saudi Arabia, Ending its ‘Pariah’ Status.”

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Agence France-Presse. “US Opposes Dictators? Yes! Except When It Supports Them.” France 24, June 7, 2022. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220607-us-opposes-dictators-yes-except-when-it-supports-them>.

“Non-Westerners also do not hesitate to point to the gaps between Western principle and Western action. Hypocrisy, double standards, and “but nots” are the price of universalist pretensions. Democracy is promoted but not if it brings Islamic fundamentalists to power; non-proliferation is preached for Iran and Iraq but not for Israel; free trade is the elixir of economic growth but not for agriculture; human rights are an issue with China but not with Saudi Arabia; aggression against oil-owning Kuwaitis is massively repulsed but not against non=oil-owning Bosnians. *Double standards in practice are the unavoidable price of universal standards of principle*”<sup>57</sup> [emphasis added]

They could even argue that the US is insincere about fighting autocracy, and the “democracy vs. autocracy” advocacy is used to hide an ulterior motive.<sup>58</sup>

One could rightly say that such an argument is a logical fallacy in the forms of *ad hominem* and whataboutism. According to this view, such an argument fails to talk about the issue at hand

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<sup>57</sup> Samuel P Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. London: Simon & Schuster, (1996): 184.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Haidong Li. “West Hides Institutional Collapse with ‘Democracy vs Autocracy’ Rhetoric.” *Global Times*, January 20, (2022). <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202201/1246519.shtml>.

and instead talks about the party making the argument.<sup>59</sup> Still, at first glance, it is a potent argument to discredit the US (although not under close examination).

To conclude this part, even though the US claims to be combating autocracies and authoritarianism abroad, historical and contemporary evidence and data do not support this claim. The US still cooperates and has friendly relations with autocracies when such a course of action is necessary to achieve US national interests, especially in dealing with China, as the Biden Administration will have to work with autocracies to confront China.

#### **IV. The United States of Autocracies**

“United we stand, divided we fall.” That is the usual adage for encouraging groups to stand in solidarity. If members of the group stand together and sort out their differences, they can stand firm and face any challenges. On the other hand, if the group is rankled with internal divisions and egoistic members, it will not be able to withstand its challenges. Therefore, if the US wants to combat autocracies, then it would be best for the US to divide its members and defeat them through the ‘divide and conquer’ strategy. However, with the ‘democracy vs. autocracy’ strategy,

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<sup>59</sup> See Michael Withey. *Mastering Logical Fallacies: The Definitive Guide to Flawless Rhetoric and Bulletproof Logic*. Berkeley: Zephyros Press, (2016) for an in-depth explanation on logical fallacies.

the US will only invigorate and encourage them to work together against the United States instead of dividing them.

One of the ways that several US administrations try to garner popular support for its cause is by grouping countries with few common characteristics and sometimes frosty relations and labeling them with undesirable names. One of the most famous examples is when President George W. Bush labeled Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an “axis of evil.”<sup>60</sup> While it is emotionally satisfying to label these countries with undesirable names, such as “axis of evil,” it makes it difficult for the US to defeat them in a Machiavellian manner. When one delves into the history of relations between these countries, it does not make sense to group them in such a way. North Korea may have cordial, if not close, friendship and cooperation with Iran and Iraq. However, Iran and Iraq fought a war for nearly a decade in the 1980s.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, it is a mistake to group Iran and Iraq as countries with the same goals and interests. Suppose the US intended to defeat both countries in a pragmatic and Machiavellian manner. In that case, the US should exploit the division between Iran, Iraq, and North Korea by incentivizing one of the countries to negotiate with the

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<sup>60</sup> George W. Bush. “President Delivers State of the Union Address.” The White House, February 1, 2002. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/2002129-11.html>.

<sup>61</sup> See Ray Takesh and Steven Simon. *The Pragmatic Superpower: Winning the Cold War in the Middle East*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, (2016): ch.9.



United States and abandon its cooperation with another. Only when the other country is defeated can the US dominate the rest.

The point is clear: the “autocracy vs. democracy” advocacy makes it hard for the United States to engage in diplomacy to divide and conquer a group of illiberal countries. The problem lies in both the autocratic governments and the US itself.

Autocratic countries could have suspicions and reservations about diplomacy and cooperation with the United States. That is because the United States and authoritarian countries operate with different software on how they see the world. The United States utilizes the software of liberal hegemony in which the US believes it must spread human rights, democracy, and the free market to the entire world. Meanwhile, autocracies use realism software in which they think that countries interact with one another to guarantee the fulfillment of their core national interests and, above all, their national survival.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, autocratic states, especially major ones, will view American diplomatic outreach as a trojan horse to hide an ulterior US motive: regime change.<sup>63</sup> For example, one of the leading Iranian suspicions of the US is that the Iranian ruling elite believes that, in every US engagement and diplomatic attempt to Iran, the US has an ulterior

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<sup>62</sup> In this case, realism and liberalism as a *prescriptive* theory is used instead of realism and liberalism as a *descriptive* theory.

<sup>63</sup> For example, see Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, 161-4.

motive to topple the regime.<sup>64</sup>

The other main obstacle lies in the US foreign policy elite. The “democracy vs. autocracy” advocacy implies that the US and her democratic allies have the moral high ground and, consequently, any negotiations, diplomatic attempts, or engagement with hostile autocratic governments could be taken as a concession or defeat even when the result benefits the United States. Stephen Walt paints this problem succinctly:

“Compounding this problem was the widespread tendency to see world politics as a Manichaeian struggle between virtuous liberal states and malevolent, rights-abusing tyrants. Instead of attributing conflicts between states to differing perceptions, competing historical narratives, or straightforward clashes of national interest, *U.S. officials and influential pundits routinely portrayed them as confrontations between good and evil.* Whether in the form of the “rogue states” targeted by the Clinton administration or the dictators lumped into the Bush administration’s “Axis of Evil,” U.S. adversaries were routinely demonized as immoral and illegitimate governments whose very existence

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<sup>64</sup> Barbara Slavin. “Dancing with the ‘Devil’ in Iran: Why Negotiations with Tehran Are Necessary.” Just Security, September 26, 2022. <https://www.justsecurity.org/83258/negotiations-with-tehran-are-necessary/>.

violated America’s deepest political convictions... Because they saw opponents as evil and believed they held the high cards, *U.S. officials tended to view concessions made to secure a deal as a form of surrender, even if the resulting agreement gave them most of what they wanted... [emphasis added].*<sup>65</sup>

Therefore, this advocacy will only tie US hands when the US needs the cooperation of autocracies when the limits of US military power have been reached. As explained in the previous part, this advocacy will give the US a bad light when cooperating with autocracies. In addition, many influential personalities and policymakers in the US will eschew any negotiations with autocratic countries as they believe such negotiations are tantamount to defeat and only benefit the autocratic ruling elite. The response of the US foreign policy elite once again demonstrates the pitfalls of this foreign strategy as they perceive negotiating with Tehran on its nuclear issue as dealing with the “devil,” appeasement, and will only benefit the Iranian ruling elite.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 76

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Aaron David Miller. “The Iran Deal Is Good—for the Mullahs.” Wilson Center, April 10, 2015. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/the-iran-deal-good-for-the-mullahs> and Jonathan Schachter. “The Iran Deal Is a Dead-End Pact — Stop Negotiating, Joe.” New York Post, March 23, 2022. <https://nypost.com/2022/03/22/the-iran-deal-is-a-dead-end-pact-stop-negotiating-joe/>.

In the present day, many US hostile diplomatic attempts against Russia and China have brought them even closer. In February 2022, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia and China published a joint statement that cemented their commitment to cooperation. Most tellingly, both parties stated that “[f]riendship between the two States has no limits” and that “there are no” forbidden “areas of cooperation.”<sup>67</sup> Therefore, it appears that Russia and China have reached the apex of their level of cooperation. Suppose the Biden Administration wishes to confront Machiavellian manner. In that case, the United States should have approached Russia and “maximize the friction” between it and China<sup>68</sup> before the Russian invasion of Ukraine to, at the very least, establish a mutually acceptable *modus vivendi* so that Russia could at least remain neutral in the US-China cold war and allow the US to focus on China. The US can use many frictions in Russia-China relations, for example, the case that Russia will be a junior partner in Russia-China relations. At the same time, Putin wants to restore Russia as a world superpower.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.” President of Russia, February 4, 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

<sup>68</sup> Eliot A. Cohen. “The Return of Statecraft: Back to Basics in the Post-American World,” *Foreign Affairs*, 101, no. 3 (2022): 127.

<sup>69</sup> Charles A. Kupchan. “The Right Way to Split China and Russia: Washington Should Help Moscow Leave a Bad Marriage,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 19, (2021). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-04/right-way-split-china-and-russia>.

However, instead of splitting Russia and China apart, the US incentivizes them to work together as this is a battle between autocracy and democracy.

Suppose the US characterizes this as a competition between the US and Chinese power and national interests. In that case, the US can drive a wedge between Russia and China by offering Russia some incentives (e.g., technology transfer, investment, etc.). Instead, if this is a battle of values, Russia will be with China as Russian values of government is more like the Chinese values of government, not the US. The US successfully drove a wedge between the Soviet Union and China in the 1970s to gain a decisive advantage over the Soviet Union during the Cold War.<sup>70</sup> While the circumstances may differ, this proves that the US could work with autocracies and former adversaries when their interests align.

All in all, the “democracy vs. autocracy” foreign policy strategy will make it difficult for the US to negotiate and conduct diplomacy with autocratic countries as they will view US outreach attempts as a trojan horse to hide the real American intentions and many influential politicians in the United States will characterize the outreach as a submission and defeat. Therefore, the US must avoid this pitfall and use diplomacy to drive a wedge between Russia and China.

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<sup>70</sup> See Henry Kissinger. *Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy*. New York: Penguin Press, (2022): 169-176.

## V. Conclusion

It seems that a consensus has been formed among the US foreign policy elite that there is a need to confront the growing might of the Chinese power. Through official statements and speeches, US president Joe Biden has embraced the notion that the US competes with China. Consequently, this competition is characterized as a battle between democracy and autocracy.

However, this is not the right policy to compete with China in great power competition. Instead of allowing the US to utilize a full range of strategies and enlist a full range of countries to confront China, the “democracy vs. autocracy” advocacy will limit the extent of US cooperation with autocratic governments, even when their interests align, due to the suspicions from autocratic governments and opposition from US politicians. The characterization could blind and dupe the United States into thinking that all democracies have a united and common goal to confront China. In reality, many democracies have their own views about China, and many do not consider Chinese autocracy a threat. Yet, some may have reservations regarding the growing might of Chinese power. Additionally, this policy will only invigorate autocracies worldwide to unite and cooperate against the US by characterizing this competition as an ideological struggle and grouping them. Worse, it opens the US to rhetorical attacks about US hypocrisy.

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Therefore, the United States must change its strategy. Instead of characterizing the US-China great power competition as a battle between democracy and autocracy, the Biden Administration should instead describe this competition as a clash between the national interests of the US and China. Using this characterization would enable the US to use the full range of tools and strategies at its disposal. Moreover, the United States will be able to enlist as many countries as possible that share its concerns in its endeavor. In addition, it will enable the United States to honestly tell other countries about its interests and goals, thus avoiding suspicion of ulterior motives for regime change. Some could argue that working with autocracies is immoral. Yet, the ultimate responsibility of the US government is to the people that elected it, not the world. Therefore, the ultimate moral compass used by the United States should be the fulfillment of American national interests and the prosperity and security of Americans.

The upcoming US-China great power competition will be one of the most defining international phenomena that could impact the lives of billions. It will put both the American and Chinese people like never before. The United States was correct when it designated China as its systemic rival. To act on this designation, gain a decisive advantage over China, and ensure the continuation of the *Pax Americana*, the US must use a correct strategy to deal with the growing might of the Chinese power and safeguard US national interests in the Indo-Pacific and around the

world. Thus, the US must choose the right strategy from early on.

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