

European and U.S. Democracy Support: The Limits of Convergence

Thomas Carothers and Richard Youngs

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Summary

Although Europe and the United States are at first glance natural partners in supporting democracy globally, since the end of the Cold War they have experienced significant oscillation between divergence and convergence in this domain. After a decade of strong convergence in the immediate post–Cold War years, they experienced a serious rift in the 2000s when then U.S. president George W. Bush advanced policies of forcible regime change as part of his larger “freedom agenda.” A return to significant alignment during the years of Barack Obama’s presidency was replaced by serious divergence after Donald Trump gained the White House and threw core elements of U.S. democracy policy into disarray. The arrival of Joe Biden to the U.S. presidency in 2021 opened the door to a potential new convergence given the strong emphasis from Biden and his foreign policy team both on making democracy and human rights a centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy and on rebuilding alliances with America’s democratic friends and partners. How has this promise worked out in practice?

Building on two recent papers, one taking stock of U.S. democracy policy under Biden and the other assessing a shift in the overall direction of European democracy policy, we explore this question, finding that the past several years have seen a new convergence between European and U.S. policymakers on democracy support but that transatlantic coordination in this domain remains partial at best:

- For the Biden administration, contending with Russia and China is the main stage of its efforts to bolster democracy versus autocracy globally. Europe and the United States have been notably aligned on Russia but only partially so on China. While European governments have hardened their positions on China in the past several

years, most of the toughening has been in the area of economic security. Unlike many of their U.S. counterparts, European politicians and policymakers have been hesitant to foreground a concern with the authoritarian nature of the Chinese government.

- Europe and the United States share a fundamental tension in their foreign policies between stated commitments to supporting democracy globally and significant realist imperatives that impel them to maintain or cultivate close ties with many autocratic governments. Yet this shared split personality often does not translate to operational policy convergence due to different specific interest-based compromises to democracy policy on the two sides of the Atlantic. Each side finds the other's mix of idealism and realism not quite as coherent or persuasive as its own.
- The Biden administration's push for multilateral pro-democracy diplomacy—evidenced most strongly in the first two Summits for Democracy, convened in 2021 and 2023—produced some convergence with European governments but less than the Biden team may initially have hoped. Many European policymakers believed that the U.S.-led effort to foster wider international coordination on democracy issues was valuable and overdue. Yet they experienced significant parts of the summit process as multilateralism *a l'américaine*: being asked to sign on to a process that Washington largely dominated.
- Finding ways to limit democratic backsliding in troubled democracies around the world has become an important part of both European and U.S. democracy policies in recent years. Here too, Europe and the United States evidence a moderate level of convergence, especially at the country level, where U.S. and European diplomats often consult on how they are perceiving and responding to undemocratic political developments. Nevertheless, U.S. and European policymakers sometimes focus on different countries, as a result of differing interests, and employ different levers of influence.
- European and U.S. democracy aid have long operated on largely parallel tracks. As the Biden administration has sought to bolster the range and weight of U.S. democracy assistance, it has generally encountered a positive European response, such as with initiatives on anti-corruption, electoral integrity, and the rule of law.
- Both Europe and the United States have faced hard questions in the past several years about what their own democratic challenges mean for their credibility as supporters of democracy beyond their borders. On the U.S. side, while Biden administration officials often acknowledge to foreign counterparts that the United States has its own share of democratic woes, the continuing toxic polarization of U.S. politics has frustrated their efforts to effect institutional reforms that address those shortcomings. In contrast, the European Union (EU) has developed a raft of new policies, laws, and funding streams that relate to democracy challenges within

member states. Overall, however, neither the United States nor the EU has made a significant effort to fuse internal and external democracy support policies through innovative new programming.

The fact that only partial convergence between Europe and the United States on international democracy support has been achieved, despite the overall favorable current political climate for such convergence, is rooted in long-standing differences on various issues, ranging from contrasting perceptions of who is the natural leader in this domain to differing strategic and economic issues at stake. In addition, European and U.S. policymakers have failed to display any sense of urgency about tightening cooperation with each other on democracy support strategies, beyond Ukraine. The lack of any established regular U.S.-European policy consultation mechanism dedicated to democracy policy indicates an important missing piece.

Current debates over U.S.-Europe relations hover nervously around the rupture that a second Trump administration and a turn toward the far right in the the June 2024 European Parliament elections could inflict—a rupture that would hit the democracy domain especially hard. Yet even in the event Biden is reelected and and mainstream European parties make a strong showing in June, the transatlantic relationship on democracy issues will still leave much to be desired and much new work will be necessary to fortify it.

Introduction

Europe and the United States are at first glance natural partners in the endeavor of supporting democracy globally. Both have long committed themselves to foreign policies with strong values components, extensively cooperate on many areas of diplomatic and security policy, and generally share compatible views about what democracy is and why it is preferable to other forms of governance. Yet U.S.-Europe cooperation on democracy-related policy and assistance has been uneven across the thirty-five years since the end of the Cold War, marked by significant oscillations between distance and closeness. The arrival of Joe Biden to the U.S. presidency in 2021 held out the promise of a fruitful period in this domain—Biden and his foreign policy team committed themselves early on to upgrading the U.S. focus on democracy globally after the troubled Trump years and to rebuilding America's alliances, while Europeans were in turn keen to repair transatlantic cooperation. How has this promise worked out in practice? In what ways are Europe and the United States well aligned on democracy issues? And in what ways not?

Building on two recent papers, one on U.S. democracy policy under Biden and the other on the defensive turn in European democracy policy, we explore these questions in this study.¹ We contend that the past several years have seen renewed convergence between the U.S. and European governments on democracy support but that transatlantic coordination in

this area remains partial at best. Some substantive differences remain between the U.S. and Europe (European governments individually and the EU collectively) on both the geopolitics of democracy support and more tactical operational questions. And even where U.S. and European democracy supporters are largely aligned, they have often not coordinated their efforts in practical ways. The limits to transatlantic coordination make international democracy support less effective than it might otherwise be, especially against today's conflictive geopolitical backdrop. Mounting concerns about the outcome of upcoming elections in Europe and the United States invite deeper reflection on the transatlantic dimension of democracy support and ways to bolster cooperation.

Oscillating Convergence and Divergence

The recent history of U.S.-Europe cooperation on democracy support is a story of four alternating phases of convergence and divergence leading up to the arrival of the Biden administration:

The 1990s: A Common Vision

The immediate post-Cold War years saw significant convergence between the United States and Europe on democracy issues. Policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic embraced the optimistic vision of a world defined by global democratic expansion and an absence of major contending ideologies, a world in which Western democracies would play a dominant role in further broadening democracy's frontiers, through diplomatic engagement, economic carrots and sticks, and emerging new portfolios of democracy assistance. European and U.S. policymakers, aid providers, and scholars largely shared a rosy set of assumptions about the forward path of democratic transitions and how to aid them—what later came to be known as “the transition paradigm.”²

U.S.-European alignment was especially notable in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, where Europeans and Americans worked side by side in the 1990s to support democratic transitions, animated by a shared sense of urgency and historical significance about the transitions in those countries. But it existed in some other regions as well. Europeans and Americans coordinated closely on aid policies toward a number of African countries aimed at incentivizing an unfolding wave of transitions away from long-standing one-party regimes to multiparty systems. Europeans and American policymakers also shared a similar outlook on supporting democracy in the Middle East, though in that region it was a highly cautious stance, given that both Europe and the United States valued their largely friendly relations with the Arab autocrats who dominated the region and served Western security and economic interests.

The 2000s: Rupture Over Regime Change

Although some European countries participated in the U.S.-led military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration's pursuit of democratic regime change through military means was deeply unsettling to many Europeans. Substantial numbers of Europeans felt estranged by the U.S. war on terrorism and the associated "freedom agenda." The fact that democracy promotion became widely associated with forcible regime change was alienating to Europeans (and many others around the world). The result in European policy and aid circles was a pointed new desire to stay clear of U.S. policies relating to democracy and a broader suspicion that U.S. support for democracy was just the United States' pursuit of its own geostrategic interests dressed up in a values wrapping. Europeans gravitated toward the idea that there was a European approach to democracy support markedly distinct from the U.S. one—based on collaboration rather than conflict, soft persuasion rather than hard force, and listening rather than preaching. The European project of expanding the EU to incorporate a number of Central and Eastern European countries bore fruit in these years and was seen by many Europeans as a distinctively European success story in democratic expansion.

The Obama Years: Partial Reconciliation

Barack Obama's arrival to power in the United States in 2009 was a significant relief to Europe and sparked a surge of hope in European capitals for a rebuilding of ties on democracy support, as part of a larger renovation of U.S.-Europe ties. Obama's way of talking about democracy support—with its emphasis on not pushing the U.S. model, listening closely to local views, and acknowledging the checkered history of U.S. interventionism in the Global South—was much more aligned with the European outlook. Europe and the United States shared relatively common approaches to major democracy developments in those years. On the Arab Spring, both expressed rhetorical support for the cause of Arab democracy and stepped up some democracy aid to the region, yet both also remained cautious diplomatically about sacrificing long-standing relations with Arab autocrats who were resisting the regional wave of political change. When civil war broke out in Libya in 2011, France, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States led a multistate coalition that intervened militarily against the government of Muammar Qaddafi to enforce United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, which called for a ceasefire. When Myanmar began moving from military rule to elected civilian rule in 2010, Europe and the United States greeted the opening with enthusiasm and worked in parallel to support it. More generally, Europe liked the Obama administration's emphasis on multilateralism on democracy and rights issues and supported some of its concrete manifestations, such as the creation of the Open Government Partnership.

Yet the damage inflicted by the Bush years had been deep and Europeans remained cautious about fully reembracing partnership with the United States on democracy despite their at least initial enthusiasm for Obama's approach to international relations. Many European

policymakers continued to believe that there were fundamental differences between U.S. and European ways of thinking and acting on democracy. Moreover, during Obama's second term, Europeans feared that the United States was losing interest in Europe as a result of Obama's "pivot to Asia" and other preoccupations and was relegating cooperation with Europe to the diplomatic backburner.³

The Trump Years: Rupture Returns

Open U.S.-Europe divergence returned with a vengeance during the Trump years. Trump's fawning embrace of multiple autocratic leaders, obvious lack of interest in democracy's global fortunes, and strident efforts to undercut the rule of law and other foundational elements of U.S. democracy wrenched Europeans away from any sense of alignment with Washington on democracy issues. More broadly, Trump's disrespect and dislike of European leaders and of major alliances and institutions of fundamental importance to Europe, like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union, opened up a gulf between the United States and Europe. To the extent that the Trump administration rhetorically emphasized democracy issues in its foreign policy, as it did toward Cuba, Venezuela, and Iran, its confrontational, regime-change approach was anathema to most European policymakers and observers.

In many countries, U.S. and European aid officials did continue working in tandem running similar kinds of democracy projects. Nongovernmental U.S. and European pro-democracy organizations also stepped up cooperation in an effort to mitigate the damage wreaked by the Trump administration. Yet the general sentiment from European democracy supporters during this period was that they were being left alone to shore up liberal values around the world. If the Bush period had caused many European policymakers to step back from democracy promotion for fear of being associated with the so-called neoconservative agenda, Trump's mercurial diplomacy seemed to have the opposite effect of pushing them to consider an EU lead role on democracy policy—at least to a modest extent.

The Biden Opportunity

Biden's defeat of Trump in the 2020 U.S. presidential election and his arrival to power in 2021 triggered hope in European capitals that productive U.S.-Europe relations across many fronts, including in the democracy sphere, could be reestablished. The strong early emphasis that Biden and his foreign policy team placed on global challenges to democracy, including within the United States and other long-established democracies, resonated widely among European policymakers emerging from the fetal crouch of the Trump years. How has this

possibility for a new U.S.-Europe convergence on democracy support worked out in practice? Across the different components of democracy support, there has been what might be described as partial convergence between the United States and Europe.

Geostrategy and Democracy

Consider first U.S. and European responses to the rising international assertiveness of China and Russia. For the Biden administration, this is the main stage of U.S. democracy policy—the core of what it describes as a global standoff between democracy and autocracy. The Biden administration has devoted significant time and energy trying to constrain China’s rising global influence through an interconnected set of efforts, including intensified alliance-building in Asia, technology and trade sanctions, and diplomatic outreach in multiple regions. Washington has also labored to push back against Russia, above all its invasion of Ukraine, but also its use of political disinformation in multiple regions to roil and divide democracies and its growing influence in the Sahel and other regions. For the Biden foreign policy team, resisting Chinese and Russian external assertiveness is not just a geopolitical strategy relating to U.S. strategic interests, but also a pro-democracy strategy given their view that China’s and Russia’s transnational influence often works against democracy in the regions and countries where it is directed.

Europeans have demonstrated a complex and varied reaction to this two-part central thrust of U.S. foreign policy. On the one hand, many Europeans are uncomfortable with the stark geopolitical division that U.S. officials present of a world divided between democratic powers and autocratic powers, seeing it as too reductionistic and divisive, and too confrontational. They worry that fusing Western support for democracy with an unadorned geopolitical agenda is likely to dilute buy-in from many countries outside of North America and Europe for that support. Yet at the same time, they worry about the increasing power of China and Russia and are glad the United States is back to standing up vocally for democracy.

European divergence from, or at least ambivalence toward, the Biden line has been greater on China than Russia. The European position toward China has hardened in the past several years but most of this toughening has been in the area of economic security: the EU collectively and individual member states have increasingly sought to protect themselves from Chinese commercial strategies through multiple new trade and subsidy instruments. The EU has become more robustly concerned with the nature of combative Chinese economic and political-security actions, but hesitant to foreground a concern with the authoritarian nature of its regime. Unlike U.S. politicians and policymakers who often criticize China’s authoritarianism as an integral part of statements about the U.S. aim to constrain China’s influence, most European leaders give far less prominence to such criticism and largely hew to expressions of concern about economic issues.

On Russia, Europe and the United States have been united in their response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including the imposition of broad-ranging sanctions against Russia and the provision of large quantities of military and economic assistance to Ukraine. Given that this response is viewed in Western capitals as seeking to defend both Ukraine's sovereignty and its democracy, this common response represents significant convergence on democracy policy. When the U.S. commitment to providing military assistance to Ukraine wavered in early 2024, this convergence was temporarily put in some doubt, to the significant worry of the major European powers. Some second-order differences persist, for example over the scope of sanctions and whether frozen Russian assets can be used to help Ukraine—although on such questions there is a range of views among European governments rather than a single, neat transatlantic divide.⁴

The UK's approach to geostrategy has been different in many ways from that of the EU since Brexit. The UK has been keen to move closer to the United States because of its post-Brexit repositioning on broad questions of foreign policy strategy. The UK's departure from the EU in this sense opened the way to its becoming a major and active player in democracy support, moving toward a fuller convergence with the United States. However, the UK has not fully embraced the U.S. outlook on geostrategy and democracy, with the UK's 2023 integrated review on foreign and security policy pointedly warning against unduly nourishing a democracy-autocracy divide.⁵ Like EU governments, the UK has in practical terms focused on Chinese behavior but not the fundamentals of China's political regime—this latter being judged to lie well beyond the scope of any realistic leverage.

Shared but Separate Realism

Looking beyond the specific challenges of responding to China and Russia, both Europe and the United States have long shared an awkward tension in their commitments to supporting democracy globally: they both articulate a foreign policy vision with democracy in a central place and engage in manifold efforts to support democracy in specific countries through diplomacy and aid; yet at the same time, their policies are heavily colored by realist considerations and compromises—they maintain or seek to cultivate close ties with many autocratic governments for the sake of diverse interests, from countering terrorism in Africa and maintaining at least some stability in the Middle East to enlisting strategic partners against China and pursuing economic interests, such as access to oil supplies and critical minerals.⁶ The realist overlay of both U.S. and European foreign policies has grown more pronounced in recent years as geostrategic tensions have grown, leading to a greater emphasis on the securitization of foreign policy and the trading off of democracy concerns when necessary to strengthen useful geostrategic partnerships.⁷

Yet while Europe and the United States both mix ambitious commitments to democratic values with compromises to those values, in practice, this shared outlook does not feel like operational convergence to many European and U.S. policymakers. In part this is because the specific realist compromises made on the two sides of the Atlantic often differ. The

United States, for example, has invested significant effort in the past several years into building a strategic partnership with Vietnam as part of Washington's Indo-Pacific Strategy.⁸ The EU has made some similar efforts, including signing a new free trade agreement with Vietnam, but Europe's high-level strategic commitment remains much more limited.⁹ In the Middle East, the continued close U.S. partnerships with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other Arab autocracies are much more strongly linked to strategic considerations relating to the bitter U.S. rivalry with Iran and the U.S. vision of Israel's security future in the region than are European relations with those countries.

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU's foreign-policy identity has begun to change notably. This evolving identity has centered increasingly on a commitment to geopolitical power, which is generally interpreted in European circles as a watershed, given the EU's previous reluctance to talk or think in terms of hard power. It points away from any idealistic focus on democracy, and yet it is often used to claim that European democracy support is now infused with a touch of sharper power. This split personality takes some clarity away from transatlantic cooperation: some European policymakers and commentators see a trend in which the EU is becoming more like the United States in its use of geopolitical power, while others insist it is a matter of Europe stepping further away from what many European policymakers still perceive to be Washington's missionary zeal about democracy.

Despite the EU's *realpolitik* drift, it remains common in European capitals to portray the United States as wracked by contradictions between its impetus to support democracy and its countervailing strategic and economic interests that limit democracy policy. In the United States, policymakers sometimes quietly criticize European governments for being unwilling to line up forthrightly on democracy issues yet not owning up to the many ways their policies fall short on the democracy front. In short, each side finds the other's mix of idealism and realism not quite as persuasive as its own. Still, it is significant that there has been as much transatlantic convergence around *realpolitik* actions that militate *against* democracy as on pro-democracy support.

Democracy Diplomacy

The Biden administration's strong push to convene the first two Summits for Democracy—the diplomatic showpiece of Biden's democracy policy from 2021 to early 2023—produced some convergence with European governments, though less perhaps than the Biden team may have initially hoped. The administration reached out to the EU early in the planning process for the first summit and was keen to have the bloc fully involved, while Europe welcomed Washington's renewed interest in multilateralism as a way to advance a common democracy agenda. Yet as the summit process unfolded, Europe experienced it as multilateralism *à l'américaine*: for the first summit, held in December 2021, Washington dominated most major parts of the process, such as selecting attendees, setting the agenda, and running the event. More than a few European diplomats professed uncertainty or even bewilderment behind the scenes as to what exactly the United States wanted from the summit.

Moreover, some specific decisions from Washington rankled the Europeans. In particular, the United States insisted on excluding Hungary even though the EU warned the administration that Hungary would then likely block the participation of the EU. When this did indeed happen, the EU institutions were forced to step back from the process, after they had initially been among the keenest supporters of Biden's initiative in Europe. Creative workarounds were found to enable European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to at least deliver a video message to the summit, and yet EU diplomats generally felt that the United States had shot itself in the foot by scuppering the possibility of the EU as a whole helping to play a coordination role for the summit process. U.S. dominance eased a bit for the second summit, held in March 2023. Four other countries (Costa Rica, the Netherlands, South Korea, and Zambia) hosted simultaneous summit gatherings, softening the Washington-centric character of the process. Yet nevertheless, many European policymakers who sought to engage with the summit process felt it remained a primarily American show to which Europe was asked to sign on.

Despite these concerns, the fact that European governments signed up to participate in the U.S.-led process was significant in reflecting a shared concern with the increasingly geostrategic ramifications of authoritarian power expansionism. While European governments certainly tried to pull the process back from a highly confrontational or binary framing against China, they also felt the effort to foster wider international coordination on democracy issues was valuable and overdue. The evolution of the summit process to bring non-Western democracies into an organizing role aligned closely with broader European diplomatic preferences. European governments reacted more positively than many other democracies around the world to the Biden initiative and positioned themselves as a bridge between the United States and non-Western powers, seeking to encourage the latter to participate and proactively shape the process's agenda.

Of course, reactions to the summit process varied among European capitals. The Nordic countries, especially Denmark and Sweden, leaned into cooperation with Washington on the summits. Some other European countries, such as Germany and France, noticeably did not. And some of the most significant elements of U.S.-European cooperation came not in the main summit itself but in the working groups on various thematic issues that were formed after the first summit and that in some cases worked productively to develop cooperation on issues like online standards, youth participation, or defending civil society. Indeed, in general, European governments urged the United States to tilt the summit process toward coordination on these kinds of concrete democracy support activities, which they saw as potentially more valuable than geopolitical grandstanding. The Biden administration did bend somewhat to other powers' concerns in this sense. The third summit, hosted by South Korea in March 2024, marked another step in this more low-key direction. In short, the Summits for Democracy manifest the same features of partial transatlantic convergence as other areas of democracy support.¹⁰

U.S.-Europe cooperation does occur in other areas of multilateral diplomacy with some connection to democracy issues. For example, in the domain of multilateral human rights diplomacy, in forums like the United Nations Human Rights Council, Europe and the United States have been working closely in sync in the Biden years, reversing the sharp divergence that occurred when the United States pulled out of the council under both Trump and Bush. The EU holds regular formal consultations on human rights policy issues with the United States, though these fall under the responsibility of European diplomats focused on human rights rather than on a broader range of democracy issues and, moreover, often fail to deliver tangible results.

Responding to Backsliding

Given the pervasiveness of democratic backsliding globally in recent years, finding ways to try to limit it has become an important part of both European and U.S. democracy policies. Such efforts usually focus on diplomatic criticism of and pressure against backsliding leaders but sometimes extend to economic sanctions, aid reductions, or other financially tangible steps. European and American responses to backsliding vary greatly depending on the overall set of interests at play and the amount of leverage available. During the past several years, the United States has engaged significantly in some countries at risk of democratic reversals—for example, working to help head off a coup in Brazil in 2022 and helping to ensure that Bernardo Arévalo, the reform-oriented candidate elected to be president of Guatemala in August 2023, was actually able to take office.¹¹ In other cases, such as India's continued illiberal drift, the U.S. response has been much weaker as a result of countervailing security interests and less leverage.¹²

European policy has displayed similar variation. As President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has moved Türkiye into an ever more pronounced authoritarian turn, the EU has de facto halted the country's accession process and gradually reduced funding to the Turkish government, while maintaining active diplomatic ties on issues like migration. The EU has engaged more strongly and deeply in its eastern borderlands in an effort to halt the risks of democratic backsliding that have at different moments beset Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Similarly to the United States, European diplomacy has centered far less on backsliding in countries where European strategic interests are at stake, as with Egypt, India, and Morocco.¹³

In this policy area as well, Europe and the United States evidence a moderate level of convergence, especially at the country level, where U.S. and European diplomats often consult on how they are perceiving and responding to undemocratic political developments in countries. The United States sometimes focuses more on certain countries where U.S. interests and influence are higher than Europe's, like Brazil and Guatemala. The converse

is also sometimes true, with the EU directing its more limited leverage to its immediate neighbors. And sometimes both the United States and the EU engage, but in different ways. For example, both the United States and EU member states have become increasingly exercised by Hungary's democratic backsliding and both have moved somewhat belatedly to tighten pressure on the Hungarian government. Yet European efforts have been channeled mainly through EU-centered processes like the union's so-called rule of law mechanism—with funds held back on quite specific grounds related to EU laws, financial probity, and standards—while the United States has adopted a more directly political approach, emphasizing tough diplomatic messaging, both in private and in public. Reflecting a long-standing difference, the United States is arguably more effective at influencing immediate political outcomes through high-level and very pointed political engagement in crisis moments, while the EU still sees itself as working best to shape political contexts in a more indirect and incremental fashion.

U.S. and European approaches to the use of sanctions relating to democracy and human rights have converged to a degree. For example, the EU and the UK have introduced human rights sanctions regimes that mirror the United States' regime introduced in Myanmar in 2021, after the coup there. The UK has been particularly keen to coordinate with the United States on several rounds of sanctions related to human rights abuses in Belarus, Haiti, Iran, Myanmar, Yemen, and other places. The EU's global human rights sanctions regime has been less in step with either the U.S. or the UK regime and remains narrower in scope. Still, the United States, the UK, and the EU have all moved toward a greater use of sanctions targeted at individuals or entities responsible for rights abuses—a somewhat toughened approach, although mostly aimed at individuals rather than methodically at country-level democratic backsliding.¹⁴

The European and U.S. responses to the recent spate of coups in the Sahel embodies this general pattern of moderate convergence. Both the United States and Europe (especially France, which has the strongest ties among European countries to the Sahel) have uneasily balanced their desire to stand against coups as a matter of pro-democratic principle with their desire to keep alive valuable security cooperation on counterterrorism and to limit Russian security partnerships in the region. Some cases, such as Burkina Faso (after its second coup in 2022) and Mali (after its 2021 coup) have seen a significant breach in both U.S. and European diplomatic ties and security assistance following coups. In others, especially where coups occurred against governments that had serious democratic deficiencies of their own, like Gabon and Guinea, the United States and Europe have come down less hard and left the door open to more active ties. U.S. and European responses have largely moved in the same directions, though not always at the same pace. After the July 2023 coup in Niger, for example, France and other European governments were somewhat quicker than Washington to cut ties with the country's new leaders.¹⁵ Again, even if there are some similarities in how the United States and Europe work through these security-democracy trade-offs, there is little evidence of much joint U.S.-EU strategizing on this increasingly important challenge.¹⁶

Democracy Aid

European and U.S. democracy aid have long operated on largely parallel tracks, with generally similar thematic areas emphasis and methods of operating.

The Biden administration has been bolstering U.S. democracy assistance—increasing the amounts, giving greater attention to some topics that are of pressing concern in many countries, like anti-corruption and technology, and upgrading the place of democracy in the bureaucratic structures of U.S. assistance. European democracy funders have also adapted to global changes in recent years, paying greater attention to supporting new kinds of civic movements, some grassroots initiatives, and a raft of digital democracy and counter-disinformation projects in other countries. Such funders have been especially interested in exploring ways to protect democracy activists being directly targeted by regimes. The EU has long been criticized for being less nimble and flexible than many other funders, including the United States. While this remains a weak point, the union's significant range of democracy funding initiatives has become more streamlined and somewhat more in line with U.S. aid modalities.

The UK's influence in debates about democracy aid has weakened in the past two or three years. The UK was for many years the highest European spender on democracy and governance funding and also the keenest on trying to bring together U.S. and European donors in this field. The UK's aid cuts since 2020 and isolation from EU debates have affected its standing on democracy assistance. The UK has made little effort to play any connecting role between the United States and the EU as successive UK governments have spent most of the time since Brexit locked in fractious battle with the union—and trying to demonstrate autonomy from EU deliberations rather than leading any push for tighter transatlantic coordination.

As the Biden administration has pushed forward in various areas of democracy aid, it has generally encountered a positive European response. On anti-corruption for example, Norway and Sweden have joined the U.S. Agency for International Development's new Integrity for Development campaign as anchor partners. Similarly, another Biden administration initiative, the Global Network for Securing Electoral Integrity has seen some buy-in from relevant EU institutions. Rule of law support continues to be a major shared area of interest for both European and U.S. democracy aid providers, with alignment manifested in multilateral groupings like the Justice Action Coalition. On civil society support, Europe and the United States are also broadly aligned, although the United States tends to be more willing to fund highly political opposition leaders, groups, and initiatives.

Overall, convergence at the level of democracy aid is fairly strong, especially in terms of overall thematic priorities. Actual operational cooperation is variable. Close coordination sometimes occurs, such as when European and U.S. aid organizations supporting free and fair elections in a country agree on a common plan regarding who will give what sort of support to the electoral management body and who will send election observers. Or the United

States and a handful of European embassies may cooperate in offering support to democracy activists being targeted by regime authorities. At other times, such coordination may be lacking or be only perfunctory. Cooperation at this level commonly depends on the willingness and interest of diplomats on the ground, rather than reflecting a formalized strategy from capitals. U.S.-Europe coordination efforts within countries often benefit from cooperative ties between U.S. and European nongovernmental or quasi-governmental democracy organizations, like the European Endowment for Democracy and the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy and its core partner organizations. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has to some degree tightened such coordination.

Democracy at Home and Abroad

Both Europe and the United States have faced hard questions in the past several years about what their own democratic challenges and shortcomings mean for their credibility as supporters of democracy beyond their borders. The incoming Biden administration felt this acutely, coming to power as it did on the back of the first election in U.S. history in which a losing incumbent denied the legitimacy of the election and tried hard to undermine the result. The Biden team hoped that by driving through some reforms to U.S. democracy, in the electoral domain for example, they could not only rid the country of its democratic queasiness but set a positive example for shaky democracies elsewhere. Yet the continuing toxic polarization of U.S. politics has resulted in blockage on all but the most minor of institutional reforms. In statements about supporting democracy abroad, Biden officials often note that the United States recognizes it has its own share of democratic woes. But they have not made any major set of innovations in U.S. democracy support that reflect this painful new reality, such as a new generation of aid programs that interlink domestic and international pro-democratic actors and initiatives.

On this point, the European situation is somewhat different. As an international organization, the EU has developed a raft of new policies, laws, and funding streams that relate to democracy challenges within its member states. Indeed, this collection of policy changes in relation to internal democracy has advanced and expanded more notably than has external EU democracy support in the last several years. The EU has deployed new conditionality mechanisms to withhold funding to Poland and Hungary. EU laws and standards have been either introduced or proposed on online political advertising, artificial intelligence regulations, foreign interference in elections and political parties, and civil society freedoms.¹⁷ Still, at a more general level the evolution of European policy has been somewhat similar to the shift in U.S. democracy policy, with the discourse more centered on addressing internal problems, but without any significant change to democracy assistance to fuse internal and external support programs.

One notable difference relating to the issue of democratic problems within Europe and the United States concerns is the question of who intervenes to help where. The United States carries out some pro-democracy aid programming in democratically troubled European

states, such as support for independent media in Hungary, and has exerted some pro-democratic pressure on the Hungarian government and other European backsliders. Yet this is a one-way street—European funders have not developed pro-democracy programming within the United States and EU governments do not engage diplomatically to try to encourage U.S. political leaders to bolster U.S. democracy. Part of the reason for this difference is the fact of Europe being a collection of countries rather than a single country, which means that the United States can focus its pro-democratic engagement in Europe on the most troubled parts. Yet the contrast also reflects the deeper asymmetries of mindset and power that have long operated in transatlantic relations.

Conclusions

The Biden years have seen a coming back together between Europe and the United States on democracy support—certainly a marked change from the Trump years. Yet the reconvergence is only partial. On Russia, it was strong in 2022 and 2023, but was shaken for several months in early 2024 as a result of the uncertainty about continued U.S. military aid for Ukraine. On China, Europe and the United States are following policy paths that overlap in some areas but diverge in others. For both Europe and the United States, significant concessions to realism often overshadow their pro-democratic policies, yet policymakers on the two sides of the Atlantic do not always align in the compromises they make and how they view each other's balancing of realism and idealism. The Biden push on pro-democratic multilateral diplomacy, in the form of the Summits for Democracy, has met a partially positive response from Europe, but also a fair amount of caution and skepticism. In responding to backsliding in particular countries, the two powers converge in their general intention but only partly in their actual practice, focusing in some cases on different countries and different methods. On the aid front, both Europe and the United States are seeking to upgrade their democracy programming to make it fit for purpose in the current geopolitical context, and in so doing they are cooperating significantly in some areas, while continuing to go their own ways in others.

Important potential strengths are lost in this only partial convergence. Europe and the United States miss out on the power of a more unified stance toward China. Their diplomatic responses to backsliding countries are sometimes less effective than they might be when aid is not leveraged jointly, diplomatic pressure not conjoined, or sanctions not coordinated. The Biden push for a major new multilateral process on global democracy was weakened by the only partial joining up with Europe on the effort. Chances have been lost in the democracy aid arena for developing fruitful mutual approaches, more efficient divisions of labor, and shared lesson learning. Much more generally, the U.S. policy vision of an overarching global contest between democracy and autocracy is more strongly questioned and inevitably weakened when America's largest democratic partner is clearly ambivalent about the basic framing of the vision.

The reasons for this still only partial convergence are several. First, for more than three decades, Europe and the United States have each felt themselves to be the natural leader on international democracy support—European governments because they see the EU as a unique democracy-based organization and the United States as weighed down by its geopolitical interests that lead it to compromise its pro-democratic aspirations; the United States because it feels it is more forthright on democracy support and more diplomatically weighty than Europe. This basic division, which has continued during the Biden years, works against cooperation by complicating the issue of who will lead when and on what.

Among U.S. officials, the view is common that Europe is hard to coordinate with, given the multiplicity of European institutions and states and the complexities of internal European policy deliberations. Washington often feels that if it does not lead, Europe will not be able to take up that mantle as a result of its own divisions. On the European side, there exists a fairly consistent perception and lament that the whole question of transatlantic cooperation on democracy tends to be framed asymmetrically: how far European governments or the EU institutions align themselves with U.S. strategies. As U.S. commitments to democracy have fluctuated over different administrations, at times quite markedly, the EU has had to adjust its approach—whereas there is little sign of the United States considering how it might better mold itself to the continuing evolution in European commitments and approaches. The almost unspoken expectation is that the EU will respond to the shifts in U.S. policies, but not vice versa. One commonly heard line from EU diplomats when Biden announced the Summit for Democracy process was that they had been proposing ideas for multilateral coordination for years and nobody on the U.S. side showed much interest in engaging—until European governments found themselves pressed by Washington to embrace a new U.S. initiative.

Second, as is well-known and as we have mentioned at various points in this paper, although European and U.S. outlooks on the importance of democracy globally align broadly, European and U.S. interests diverge on enough specific issues and in enough particular places to create small-scale divergences and frictions that add up. Sometimes these are stylistic, such as a European disinclination to be “too ideological” in standing up for democracy and a U.S. tendency to be more directly confrontational in some settings. Others are more substantive, such as the complicated spectrum of differing views on both sides of the Atlantic on the Middle East, especially regarding Iran and Israel-Palestine relations. Europeans still tend to understand democratization as an institutional process that results from long-term change, whereas U.S. democracy promoters are more inclined to see it as a political process determined by committed democratic actors.

Yet thirdly (and much less well understood), the limits to transatlantic coordination on democracy also result from the exact opposite: a shared *overly benign sentiment* regarding the place of democracy in the West’s global identity despite shifts in international order that are throwing liberal norms into doubt and onto the defensive. European and U.S. policymakers and aid officials so widely assume that a shared commitment to democracy is what sets the West apart from other powers that they do not seem to feel any genuine urgency

in tightening cooperation with each other on democracy support strategies and funding. The United States and EU have put considerable high-level diplomatic effort in recent years into softening tensions and differences on high-priority issues like security and trade. In comparison, they seem to see most democracy support (Ukraine being a major exception) as less important and less prone to direct rivalry and thus in less need of similarly high-level diplomatic attention and coordination. Neither side has pressed especially hard for the G7 to play a catalyzing role in democracy policy, for instance. In fact, there is no established, regular U.S.-European policy consultation mechanism dedicated to democracy policy. This sin of omission is in part responsible for the only partial degree of transatlantic coordination on democracy support in the past several years—even as both the United States and the EU rhetorically insist there is no higher goal in the current geopolitical context.

The establishment of such a diplomatic mechanism would thus be an important step forward, especially if it were given a mandate to be a forum where U.S. and European policymakers would together take up medium- to large-scale strategic questions about how to make their democracy support fit for purpose in the current daunting context, like how to move from a habitually reactive mode to a more proactive mode on responding to democratic backsliding, how to better navigate security-democracy trade-offs in places where strategic and values interests collide, and how to be more effective in aligning with democracies in the Global South that are interested in supporting democracy beyond their borders. If such a mechanism were set up and gained some traction, it could then work both upward and downward to expand its reach—upward to address larger-scale issues relating to democracy support like forging greater U.S.-European alignment on integrating systemic political concerns into China policy and downward to give a stronger diplomatic impetus to specific areas of cooperation in the democracy aid arena.

The fact that transatlantic convergence on democracy has been only partial in the past few years despite a relatively positive political context for building such convergence should be taken as a warning. Current debates over Europe-U.S. relations hover nervously around the rupture that a second Trump administration might inflict, and around the risk that a strong surge of the far right in Europe in the upcoming June 2024 European Parliament elections could add further complications. Such a rupture would almost certainly hit the democracy policy domain especially hard, risking another unproductive turn in the long oscillation between U.S. and European convergence and divergence. Yet even in the event of a Democratic candidate winning the U.S. elections and a resilient showing from mainstream parties in European elections, the transatlantic relationship on democracy issues would leave much to be desired and there would be much new work to be done to fortify it. The partial convergence that we have described in this paper is in some ways a positive trend, yet it still leaves democracy more exposed and vulnerable globally than it might otherwise be, both within and beyond the West.

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Notes

Research note: Substantial information in the above analysis was drawn from multiple formal interviews and informal conversations that the authors had with relevant policymakers. On the U.S. side, this included current and former policymakers at the staff of the National Security Council, the U.S. Department of State, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. On the European side, this included current and former policymakers at the European External Action Service, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and other relevant institutions. The opinions expressed in the paper remain the responsibility of the authors alone.

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