

# PROJECT SYNDICATE

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## When Democracies Collide

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BERLIN – The multipolar nature of today’s international system will again be on display at the upcoming G-20 summit in Los Cabos, Mexico. Global problems are no longer solved, crises managed, or global rules defined, let alone implemented, the old-fashioned way, by a few, mostly Western, powers. Incipient great and middle powers, such as India, Brazil, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and South Africa, also demand their say.

Some of these powers are still emerging economies. Politically, however, most of them have crossed the threshold that has long limited their access to the kitchen of international decision-making. The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (the “P-5”) still defend their right to veto resolutions, and their military power is unmatched. But they can no longer dispose of sufficient resources, competence, and legitimacy to cope with global challenges or crises on their own.

Bipolarity is a thing of the past, and it is unlikely to re-emerge in a new Sino-American “G-2.” It is equally unlikely for the foreseeable future that any one club of countries, such as the G-7 or G-8, will again assume a quasi-hegemonic position. Even the G-20 in its current composition may not really represent the forces that can and will shape the twenty-first century.

For the United States, the European Union, Japan, and other members of the “Old West,” the good news is that most of the emerging powers that are positioning themselves for a more active global role are also democracies. Within the G-20, only two states – China and Saudi Arabia – explicitly do not want to be liberal democracies, while a third, Russia, has developed into an autocracy with a democratic façade.

The not-so-good news is that these new democratic powers do not necessarily share the Old West’s political agenda. For example, they differ about climate policies, seeing a threat to development. Similarly, while new middle and great powers do not always agree, they are generally more skeptical of both international sanctions and military interventions.

Moreover, some of the most important of these states differ substantially with the US, and often also with the EU, about the right approach toward regional conflicts, especially in the Middle East. Thus, in 2010, the US found itself in a serious diplomatic dispute with Turkey and Brazil about how to resolve the conflict with Iran over its nuclear program. Without actually admitting it, the US was clearly unhappy that these two states tried to play a diplomatic role of their own in the dispute.

Differences are also apparent where new democratic middle or great powers have formed new groups or clubs, such as the BRICS, together with non-democratic powers. India, Brazil, and South Africa are using such formats in a pragmatic way to pursue their interests, or simply to demonstrate their increased international weight. There is little agreement between them and Russia or China – both P-5 members – with regard to political values or to fundamental questions of international order.

Along with many other states in the global South, however, Russia and China tend to defend the principle of non-interference, and they are generally reluctant to support any US or European attempts to project democracy or defend human rights in other countries.

Not a few policymakers in the US and in Europe have reacted with astonishment, or even annoyance, to these emerging democratic powers' attempts to pursue their own agendas on the world stage. Such reactions partly reflect old thinking rooted in the Cold War, when democratic countries might differ over details, but would agree about the main questions of international politics. Those who pursued a different agenda on substantial matters were either not part of the “democratic camp” or were not important international players.

By contrast, a central feature of today's globalized, multipolar world is that shared democratic values do not guarantee agreement about substantial questions of international politics. The more democracies there are, the more conflicts of interests and differences are likely to emerge between democratic countries.

There is little reason to react with anger when states like Turkey, Brazil, and South Africa set priorities different from those of Europe or the US, or have different views about how to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran, development aid, democracy promotion, or environmental protection. The US example shows clearly that democratic great powers often pursue their interests with little regard for a global common good that others have defined.

In other words, the international order is becoming more pluralistic. The task for established Western democracies is to accept and cope with such “democratic differences” on the international level, and to seek multilateral coalitions to manage or solve problems.

In principle, the EU is better positioned than the US (and certainly than China) to take on this task. Europeans are well practiced in dealing with differences and shaping consensus among principally like-minded states. That said, Europe needs to learn to be clearer and more transparent about the interests underlying its own policies, rather than suggesting that its positions on a specific subject represent the only rational implementation of democratic values and norms.