

A union of democracies

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By Steve Charnovitz

ONE of the intriguing ideas circulating in Washington is the creation of a new international organization exclusively for democracies. The purpose of this body -- call it the United Democracies (UD) -- would be to promote the values and interests of democratic societies. So far, political support has come from both American political parties. Former Vice-President Walter Mondale espoused the concept during a campaign address last fall. Earlier this year the Republican Research Committee of the House recommended that the US broach the idea with other nations.

Although the UD proposal was born out of a dissatisfaction with the United Nations, no one is suggesting that the new body replace the UN. Rather, UD advocates seek an institution that could work parallel to the UN, but without the presence of the UN's noted troublemakers.

The UD would have four principal missions: First, it would develop joint policies for dealing with the most pressing problems facing democracy, such as public debt and terrorism. One way to commence would be a discussion of Jean-Francois Revel's recent and provocative book, "How Democracies Perish." Revel argues that democracy tends to ignore and deny threats to its existence because it loathes doing what is needed to counter them.

A second mission is cooperative programs for both member and nonmember countries. Typical projects would include technical aid in monitoring elections and assistance in establishing pluralist groups like trade unions. Many observers have pointed out a need to increase exchange programs in order to counter the huge Soviet investments in disinformation and "educational" trips to Moscow.

A third task would be to provide economic aid to members in financial straits, such as the recently reborn democracies of South America. By assuring taxpayers that their aid giving was dispensed on the basis of shared democratic values, rather than the geopolitics of the moment, the UD might be able to increase the total aid going to democracies. Such aid could save some democracies from the economic collapse that so often leads to military takeover.

A fourth activity would be to debate whether military assistance is justified in particular conflicts. Certainly, the UD would not carry out any military action. Its role would be to investigate competing claims of besieged governments and "freedom fighters" and try to reach a consensus as to when aid was warranted. Actions taken under the imprimatur of the UD should be easier to defend than unilateral actions taken by one country.

With respect to organization, there would be strict standards for admitting only real democracies. No self-proclaimed democracies like the German Democratic Republic. The UD charter would also call for the mandatory expulsion of any member that ceased to be a democracy. This is in sharp contrast to the UN Charter, which permits expulsion for violating UN principles but has been invoked only against Taiwan.

What are the roadblocks to the UD? One disadvantage is that it would distract attention from the UN and lessen interest in working for needed reforms. This is a valid concern. Counterbalancing it, however, is the favorable effect a successful UD could have by giving the UN members a positive role model.

In view of the stakes, an international organization for democracies seems worth a try.

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