

The Big Read **US foreign policy**

## **Betting on democracy: Biden's big idea for US foreign policy**

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Facing competition from China and Russia, the White House is emphasising liberal values. But will it push autocracies closer together?

**Edward Luce** in Washington 15 HOURS AGO

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If you could boil down Joe Biden's foreign policy to its essentials, two things would stand out: competition with China, and the return of American values after the "aberration" of Donald Trump. Both are prevalent, although in tension, in Biden's Democracy Summit, which the White House will host this Thursday and Friday.

The virtual gathering will feature the heads of 111 governments and exclude China, Russia and most other autocracies. Even in America's long history of proselytising freedom, nothing like this has been tried before.

"It tells the world that America still believes in democracy and wants to put it back on the menu," says Michael Abramowitz, head of Freedom House, which has registered a shrinkage in global freedom in each of the last 15 years. "The risk is that it is seen as a talking shop which could deepen cynicism about democracy."

Biden's grand online gathering could hardly be more dramatically timed. It coincides with a formidable Russian military build-up on Ukraine's eastern border and in the wake of escalating Chinese military activity around the island of Taiwan.

On Tuesday Biden held a two-hour video conference with Vladimir Putin in which he threatened a drastic step up in western sanctions if Russia breached Ukraine's borders. Whether Biden's warnings have any effect on Putin's territorial revisionism, which have so far appeared impervious to economic pressure, is an open question.

Tensions in the South China Sea appear to have subsided a little following a call between Biden and Xi Jinping last month. It is a safe bet that the words "democracy" and "summit" did not dominate Biden's discussion with either Putin or Xi. The contention that the world is in a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism is nevertheless at the heart of Biden's foreign policy — and one that he hopes will reboot America's alliances.

Controversy over the usefulness — and wisdom — of the summit flared up last month when the White House released the guest list. It included 29 countries [that Freedom House defines as "partly free"](#), such as Colombia, Indonesia and Kenya, and three that it classifies as "not free" — Iraq, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

This exposed Biden to criticism of smuggling realpolitik into a summit that was meant to be about values. Each discrete choice can be justified in geopolitical terms. As the

dominated state and a close ally of China.

If curbing Beijing's influence was a guiding aim, why were Singapore and Thailand left out? Israel could not be the sole country in the Middle East to be invited, which is why "not free" Iraq was included. Having suffered a coup earlier this year, Tunisia ruled itself out. It is hard to see any grounds to invite Angola and the DRC other than concern over China's stranglehold on their resources, including materials that feed into lithium batteries and the iPhone.

European critics asked why illiberal Poland was invited when illiberal Hungary was justifiably excluded? Likewise, what does Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil, which is on the list, have over Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey, which is absent? Others questioned the wisdom of inviting impeccably democratic Taiwan, which is not formally recognised as a country by the US, given China's neuralgia over the island's separatist potential. Similar flags were raised about the inclusion of Ukraine — by some measures as oligarchic and corrupt as Russia, which in recent weeks has amassed 175,000 troops on Ukraine's eastern border. And so on.



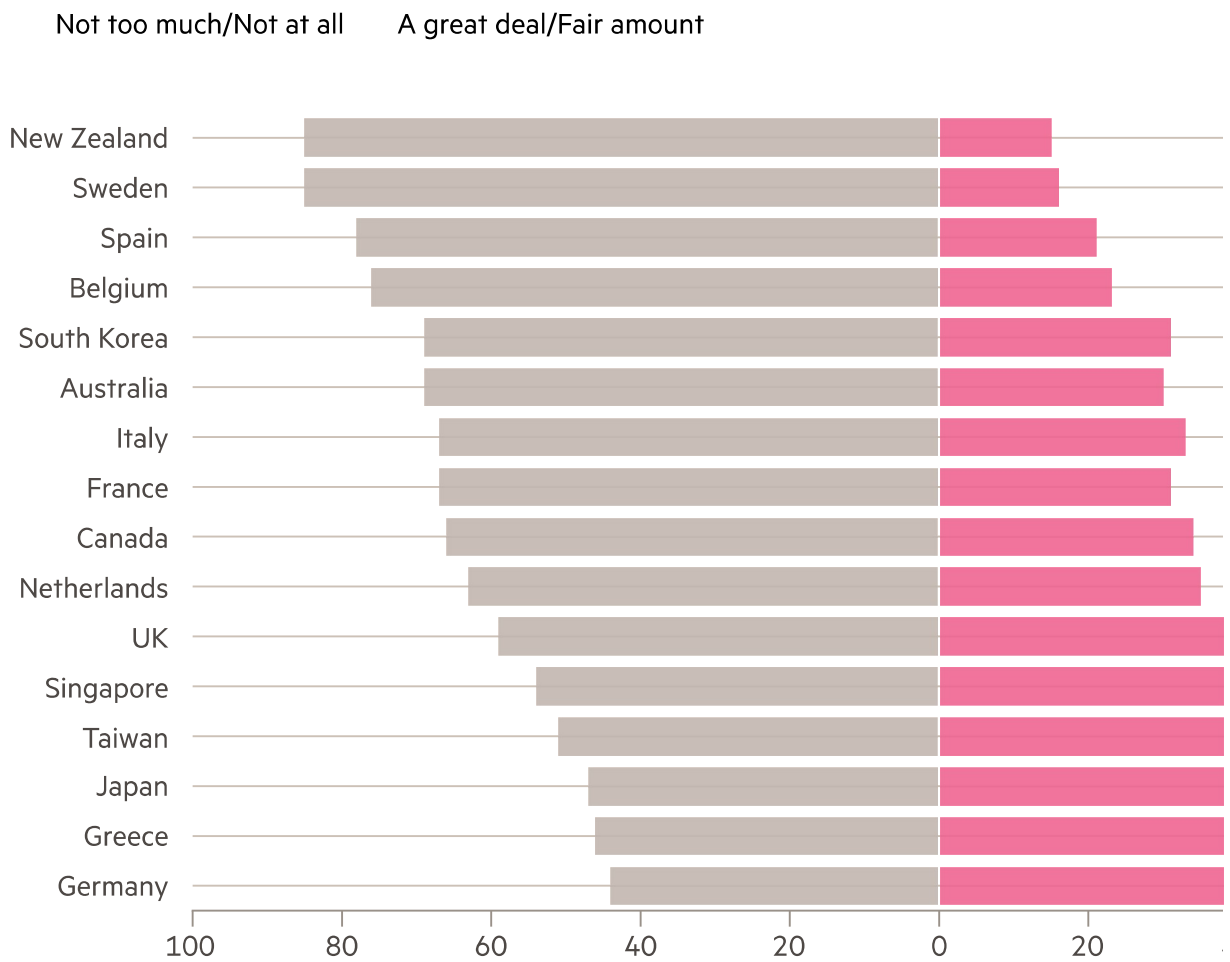
Taiwanese tanks take part in a drill in New Taipei City in September. Some question the wisdom of inviting Taiwan to the summit © Ritchie B Tongo/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

democracy [as opposed to shaming weak ones],” says a senior official. “We want to increase that drumbeat. There are naturally going to be many different points of view.”

The White House adds that their events, most of which will be streamed to the public via its website, will produce “deliverables”, such as a declaration on internet freedom, support for human rights and a pledge to fight money laundering.

## Few countries think the US considers their interests when making foreign policy decisions

Per cent



FINANCIAL TIMES

Source: Pew Research Center (Spring 2021 Global Attitudes Survey)

## Authoritarianism, the new communism

A more recent point cited in the summit's favour is how worried it is making China and Russia. Their ambassadors to the US wrote a joint letter last month to Washington's National Interest magazine dismissing the summit as a product of "cold war mentality" that would heighten the dangers of "ideological confrontation".

On Sunday, China's foreign ministry released [a scathing 25-page white paper](#) entitled "The state of Democracy in the United States", which almost exclusively cited American sources on money's grip over US politics, the widening wealth gap, racial discrimination and Washington's "tragic mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic". A surprisingly large share of US foreign policy experts may be dismissive of the summit's value. Beijing, however, seems to be taking it seriously. "If the only thing this summit accomplishes is drawing China into a public debate on which system works best then it will have been worth it," says Thomas Wright, a Brookings Institution scholar.

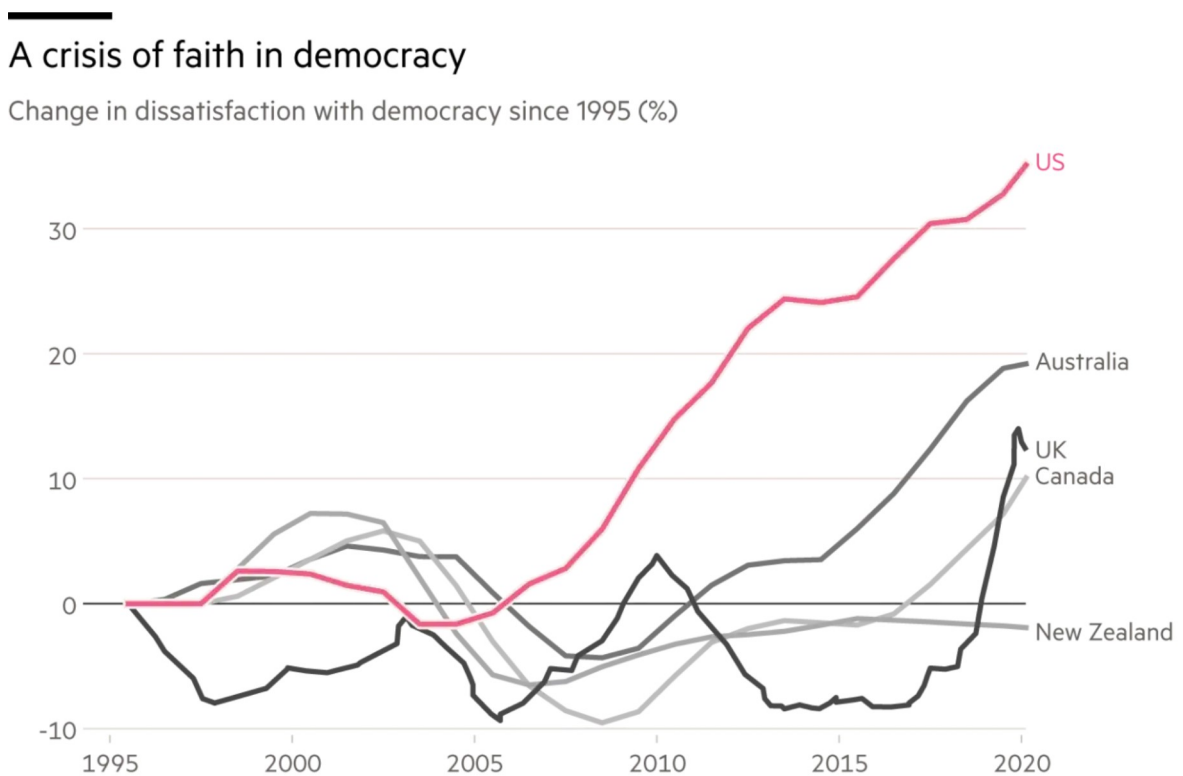


panemics, terrorism and other common problems. Running through all this is the concern that America's values will clash with its interests, leaving both diminished — a recurring US dilemma.

“It doesn't seem as though Biden has thought this through very carefully,” says Stephen Walt, a professor at Harvard Kennedy School. “If democracy is our main goal then should we be siding with Saudi Arabia and Egypt? If containing China is our real purpose, then can we afford to be so choosy about who we talk to?”

Such critiques echo cold war controversies, when US presidents heralded freedom as the core value while shoring up juntas that were willing to suppress pro-Soviet forces. These included ones that had been democratically elected, such as Salvador Allende's socialist government in Chile, which was overthrown in a CIA-backed coup in 1973, or Ferdinand Marcos's dictatorship in the Philippines and Jonas Savimbi's Angola — each of which abused human rights on a par with Soviet-backed regimes. “Realists”, including those at Washington's recently-formed Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, say that Biden risks falling into the same trap as his cold war predecessors.

“This is the same playbook with ‘authoritarianism’ substituted for ‘communism’,” says Quincy's Anatol Lieven. “The problem is that if you make democracy your absolute moral yardstick, every inconsistency will be leapt on as hypocrisy.”



Sources: Bennett Institute for Public Policy, Cambridge University  
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the US-based Saudi journalist. An even bigger one was Biden's decision to evacuate US troops from Afghanistan last summer leaving its 40m people and thousands of human rights activists and journalists to the mercies of the Taliban. Biden has also continued to give billions in military aid with only minimal conditions attached to Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's dictatorial regime in Egypt.

"Either democracy matters, or it doesn't," says a senior diplomat for a country allied to the US. "Why give America's detractors such an easy opening? How will this improve the world in practice?"

## Leading by example

The charge of double-standards is applied most acutely to the condition of American democracy, which the Economist Intelligence Unit downgraded to a "flawed democracy" after Trump was elected in 2016. If anything, America's friends feel even greater dread about US democratic backsliding since Trump was defeated last year. A majority of Republican voters have swallowed the myth that Biden stole the election. Though Biden can hardly be blamed for rising authoritarian sentiment on America's right, or that Trump shows every sign of running again in 2024, his Democracy Summit risks being a distraction.

would check or undo moves by Republican-run states since January to strip local election officials of their independence.

The fact that Trump could become president again, possibly through “election subversion”, also makes America’s partners wary of signing up to a US freedom agenda that may have a limited shelf life. Their instinct is to hedge against the risk that it might be Biden, rather than Trump, who turns out to be the aberration.

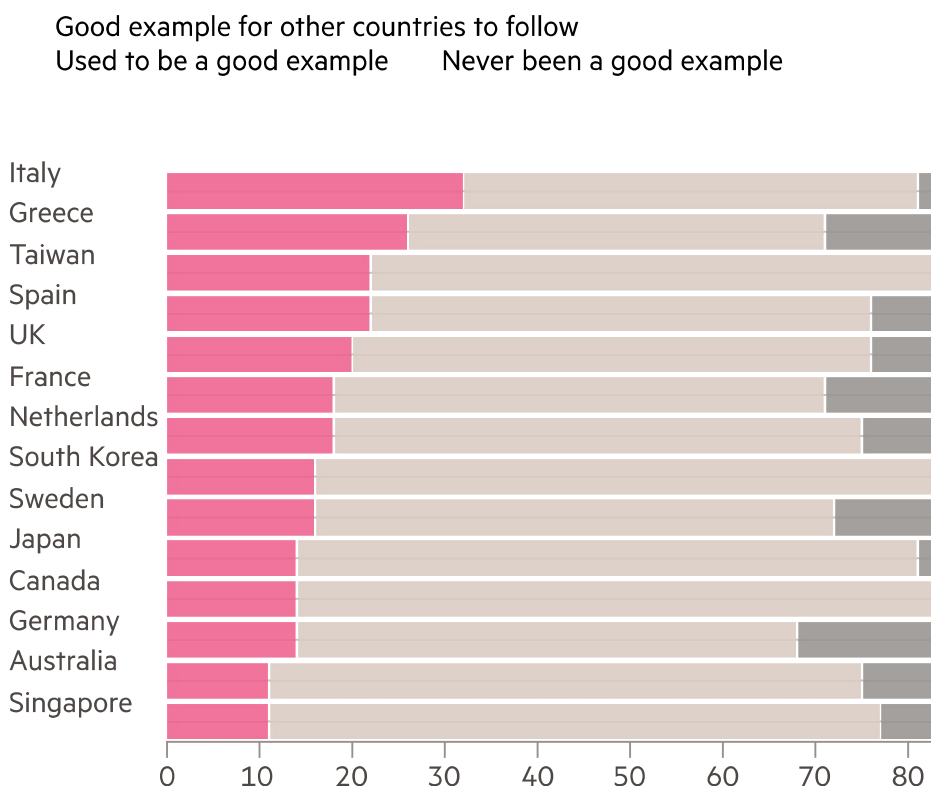
“The best thing Biden can do for democracy is to protect it at home — it is always better to show than tell,” says Walt. “So far he has very little to show for it.”

According to Pew Research, just 17 per cent of those polled around the world cited American democracy as “a good example to follow”. Harvard’s Institute of Politics found that only 7 per cent of American 18-29-year-olds described their country as a healthy democracy. More than half said it was either in trouble or had already failed.

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## Most people believe the US is no longer a good model of democracy

% who believe democracy in the US is ...





they had before. It will also present Beijing with easy propaganda.

“The temptation is for China to ask, “Where would you rather live? Singapore or the Philippines? The United Arab Emirates or Iraq?” says Lieven. “Most people would probably choose undemocratic Singapore and the UAE.”

It could also drive Russia more closely into China's embrace at a time when Moscow is betraying hints of insecurity about Beijing's reach into its “near abroad”. Hopes of prising Russia from China's embrace — and exploiting fears of it becoming China's little brother — may now seem academic given Putin's ominous build-up on the Ukrainian border. Nevertheless, in the long-term Russia is unlikely to want to become a satellite of Beijing.



US colonel Brandon Presley during a visit by a delegation of the US embassy to the war-hit Donetsk region of Ukraine in November  
© Ukrainian Joint Forces Operation Press Service/AP

America's friends should be forgiven for fearing it might be the latter. In the wake of

