**The End of History**

I.

In the early 1990s, optimism was understandable. The collapse of the communist empire and the apparent embrace of democracy by Russia seemed to augur a new era of global convergence. The great adversaries of the Cold War suddenly shared many common goals, including a desire for economic and political integration. Even after the political crackdown that began in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the disturbing signs of instability that appeared in Russia after 1993, most Americans and Europeans believed that China and Russia were on a path toward liberalism. Boris Yeltsin's Russia seemed committed to the liberal model of political economy and closer integration with the West. The Chinese government's commitment to economic opening, it was hoped, would inevitably produce a political opening, whether Chinese leaders wanted it or not.

Such determinism was characteristic of post-Cold War thinking. In a globalized economy, it was widely believed, nations had no choice but to liberalize--first economically, then politically--if they wanted to compete and to survive. As national economies approached a certain level of per capita income, growing middle classes would demand legal and political power, which rulers would have to grant if they wanted their nations to prosper. Since democratic capitalism was the only model of success for developing societies, all societies would eventually choose such a path. In the battle of ideas, liberalism had triumphed. "At the end of history," as Francis Fukuyama famously put it, "there are no serious ideological competitors left to liberal democracy. "

The economic and ideological determinism of the early post-Cold War years produced two broad assumptions that shaped both policies and expectations. One was an abiding belief in the inevitability of human progress, the belief that history moves in only one direction--a faith born in the Enlightenment, dashed by the brutality of the twentieth century, and given new life by the fall of communism. The other was a prescription for patience and restraint. Rather than confront and challenge autocracies, it was better to enmesh them in the global economy, support the rule of law and the creation of stronger state institutions, and let the ineluctable forces of human progress work their magic.

But the grand expectation that the world had entered an era of convergence has proved wrong. We have entered an age of divergence. Since the mid-1990s, the nascent democratic transformation in Russia has given way to what may best be described as a "czarist" political system, in which all important decisions are taken by one man and his powerful coterie. Vladimir Putin and his spokesmen speak of "democracy," but they define the term much as the Chinese do. For Putin, democracy is not about competitive elections so much as the implementation of popular will. The regime is democratic because the government consults with and listens to the Russian people, discerns what they need and want, and then attempts to give it to them. As Ivan Krastev notes, "The Kremlin thinks not in terms of citizens' rights but in terms of the population's needs. " Elections do not offer a choice, but only a chance to ratify choices made by Putin, as in the recent "selection" of Dmitry Medvedev to succeed Putin as president. The legal system is a tool to be used against political opponents. The party system has been purged of political groups not approved by Putin. The power apparatus around Putin controls most of the national media, especially television.

A majority of Russians seem content with autocratic rule, at least for now. Unlike communism, Putin's rule does not impinge much on their personal lives, as long as they stay out of politics. Unlike the tumultuous Russian democracy of the 1990s, the present government, thanks to the high prices of oil and gas, has at least produced a rising standard of living. Putin's efforts to undo the humiliating post-Cold War settlement and restore the greatness of Russia is popular. His political advisers believe that "avenging the demise of the Soviet Union will keep us in power."

For Putin, there is a symbiosis between the nature of his rule and his success in returning Russia to "great power" status. Strength and control at home allow Russia to be strong abroad. Strength abroad justifies strong rule at home. Russia's growing international clout also shields Putin's autocracy from foreign pressures. European and American statesmen find they have a full plate of international issues on which a strong Russia can make life easier or harder, from energy supplies to Iran. Under the circumstances, they are far less eager to confront the Russian government over the fairness of its elections or the openness of its political system.

Putin has created a guiding national philosophy out of the correlation between power abroad and autocracy at home. He calls Russia a "sovereign democracy," a term that neatly encapsulates the nation's return to greatness, its escape from the impositions of the West, and its adoption of an "eastern" model of democracy. In Putin's view, only a great and powerful Russia is strong enough to defend and advance its interests, and also strong enough to resist foreign demands for western political reforms that Russia neither needs nor wants. In the 1990s, Russia wielded little influence on the world stage but opened itself wide to the intrusions of foreign businessmen and foreign governments. Putin wants Russia to have great influence over others around the world while shielding itself from the influence of unwelcome global forces.

Putin looks to China as a model, and for good reason. While the Soviet Union collapsed and lost everything after 1989, as first Mikhail Gorbachev and then Boris Yeltsin sued for peace with the West and invited its meddling, Chinese leaders weathered their own crisis by defying the West. They cracked down at home and then battened down the hatches until the storm of Western disapproval blew over. The results in the two great powers were instructive. Russia by the end of the 1990s was flat on its back. China was on its way to unprecedented economic growth, military power, and international influence.

The Chinese learned from the Soviet experience, too. While the democratic world waited after Tiananmen Square for China to resume its inevitable course upward to liberal democratic modernity, the Chinese Communist Party leadership set about shoring up its dominance in the nation. In recent years, despite repeated predictions in the West of an imminent political opening, the trend has been toward consolidation of the Chinese autocracy rather than reform. As it became clear that the Chinese leadership had no intention of reforming itself out of power, Western observers hoped that they might be forced to reform despite themselves, if only to keep China on a path of economic growth and to manage the myriad internal problems that growth brings. But that now seems unlikely as well.

Today most economists believe that China's remarkable growth should be sustainable for some time to come. Keen observers of the Chinese political system see a sufficient combination of competence and ruthlessness on the part of the Chinese leadership to handle problems as they arise, and a population prepared to accept autocratic government so long as economic growth continues. As Andrew J. Nathan and Bruce Gilley have written, the present leadership is unlikely to "succumb to a rising tide of problems or surrender graciously to liberal values infiltrated by means of economic globalization." Until events "justify taking a different attitude, the outside world would be well advised to treat the new Chinese leaders as if they are here to stay."

Growing national wealth and autocracy have proven compatible after all. Autocrats learn and adjust. The autocracies of Russia and China have figured out how to permit open economic activity while suppressing political activity. They have seen that people making money will keep their noses out of politics, especially if they know their noses will be cut off. New wealth gives autocracies a greater ability to control information--to monopolize television stations, and to keep a grip on Internet traffic--often with the assistance of foreign corporations eager to do business with them.

In the long run, rising prosperity may well produce political liberalism, but how long is the long run? It may be too long to have any strategic or geopolitical relevance. As the old joke goes, Germany launched itself on a trajectory of economic modernization in the late nineteenth century and within six decades it became a fully fledged democracy: the only problem was what happened in the intervening years. So the world waits for change, but in the meantime two of the world's largest nations, with more than a billion and a half people and the second-and third-largest militaries between them, now have governments committed to autocratic rule and may be able to sustain themselves in power for the foreseeable future.

The power and the durability of these autocracies will shape the international system in profound ways. The world is not about to embark on a new ideological struggle of the kind that dominated the Cold War. But the new era, rather than being a time of "universal values," will be one of growing tensions and sometimes confrontation between the forces of democracy and the forces of autocracy.

During the Cold War, it was easy to forget that the struggle between liberalism and autocracy has endured since the Enlightenment. It was the issue that divided the United States from much of Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It divided Europe itself through much of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Now it is returning to dominate the geopolitics of the twenty-first century.

II.

The presumption over the past decade has been that when Chinese and Russian leaders stopped believing in communism, they stopped believing in anything. They had become pragmatists, without ideology or belief, simply pursuing their own and their nation's interests. But the rulers of China and Russia, like the rulers of autocracies in the past, do possess a set of beliefs that guides them in both domestic and foreign policy. It is not an all-encompassing, systematic worldview like Marxism or liberalism. But it is a comprehensive set of beliefs about government and society and the proper relationship between rulers and their people.

The rulers of Russia and China believe in the virtues of a strong central government and disdain the weaknesses of the democratic system. They believe their large and fractious nations need order and stability to prosper. They believe that the vacillation and chaos of democracy would impoverish and shatter their nations, and in the case of Russia that it already did so. They believe that strong rule at home is necessary if their nations are to be powerful and respected in the world, capable of safeguarding and advancing their interests. Chinese rulers know from their nation's long and often turbulent history that political disruptions and divisions at home invite foreign interference and depredation. What the world applauded as a political opening in 1989, Chinese leaders regard as a near-fatal display of disagreement.

So the Chinese and Russian leaders are not simply autocrats. They believe in autocracy. The modern liberal mind at "the end of history" may not appreciate the attractions of this idea, or the enduring appeal of autocracy in this globalized world; but historically speaking, Russian and Chinese rulers are in illustrious company. The European monarchs of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries were thoroughly convinced, as a matter of political philosophy, of the superiority of their form of government. Along with Plato, Aristotle, and every other great thinker prior to the eighteenth century, they regarded democracy as the rule of the licentious, greedy, and ignorant mob. And in the first half of the twentieth century, for every democratic power like the United States, Great Britain, and France, there was an equally strong autocratic power, in Germany, Russia, and Japan. The many smaller nations around the world were at least as likely to model themselves on the autocracies as on the democracies. Only in the past half-century has democracy gained widespread popularity around the world, and only since the 1980s, really, has it become the most common form of government.

The rulers of Russia and China are not the first to suggest that it may not be the best. It is often claimed that the autocrats in Moscow and Beijing are interested only in lining their pockets--that the Chinese leaders are just kleptocrats and that the Kremlin is "Russia, Inc." Of course the rulers of China and Russia look out for themselves, enjoying power for its own sake and also for the wealth and luxuries it brings. But so did many great kings, emperors, and popes in the past. People who wield power like to wield power, and it usually makes them rich. But they usually believe also that they are wielding it in the service of a higher cause. By providing order, by producing economic success, by holding their nations together and leading them to a position of international influence, respectability, and power, they believe that they are serving their people. Nor is it at all clear, for the moment, that the majority of people they rule in either China or Russia disagree.

If autocracies have their own set of beliefs, they also have their own set of interests. The rulers of China and Russia may indeed be pragmatic, but they are pragmatic in pursuing policies that will keep themselves in power. Putin sees no distinction between his own interests and Russia's interests. When Louis XIV remarked, "L'Etat, c'est moi," he was declaring himself the living embodiment of the French nation, asserting that his interests and France's interests were the same. When Putin declares that he has a "moral right" to continue to rule Russia, he is saying that it is in Russia's interest for him to remain in power; and just as Louis XIV could not imagine it being in the interests of France for the monarchy to perish, neither can Putin imagine it could be in Russia's interest for him to give up power. As Minxin Pei has pointed out, when Chinese leaders face the choice between economic efficiency and the preservation of power, they choose power. That is their pragmatism.

The autocrats' interest in self-preservation affects their approach to foreign policy as well. In the age of monarchy, foreign policy served the interests of the monarch. In the age of religious conflict, it served the interests of the church. In the modern era, democracies have pursued foreign policies to make the world safer for democracy. Today the autocrats pursue foreign policies aimed at making the world safe, if not for all autocracies, then at least for their own.

Russia is a prime example of how a nation's governance at home shapes its relations with the rest of the world. A democratizing Russia, and even Gorbachev's democratizing Soviet Union, took a fairly benign view of NATO and tended to have good relations with neighbors that were treading the same path toward democracy. But today Putin regards NATO as a hostile entity, calls its enlargement "a serious provocation," and asks, "Against whom is this expansion intended?" In fact, NATO is no more aggressive or provocative toward Moscow today than it was in Gorbachev's time. If anything, it is less so. NATO has become more benign, just as Russia has become more aggressive. When Russia was more democratic, Russian leaders saw their interests as intimately bound up with the liberal democratic world. Today the Russian government is suspicious of the democracies, especially those near its borders.

This is understandable. For all their growing wealth and influence, the twenty-first-century autocracies remain a minority in the world. As some Chinese scholars put it, democratic liberalism became dominant after the fall of Soviet communism and is sustained by an "international hierarchy dominated by the United States and its democratic allies," a "U.S.-centered great power group." The Chinese and Russians feel like outliers from this exclusive and powerful clique. "You western countries, you decide the rules, you give the grades, you say, 'you have been a bad boy,'" complained one Chinese official at Davos this year. Putin also complains that "we are constantly being taught about democracy."

The post-Cold War world looks very different when seen from autocratic Beijing and Moscow than it does from democratic Washington, London, Paris, Berlin, or Brussels. For the leaders in Beijing, it was not so long ago that the international democratic community, led by the United States, turned on China with a rare unity, imposing economic sanctions and even more painful diplomatic isolation after the crackdown at Tiananmen Square. The Chinese Communist Party, according to Fei-Ling Wang, has had a "persisting sense of political insecurity ever since," a "constant fear of being singled out and targeted by the leading powers, especially the United States," and a "profound concern for the regime's survival, bordering on a sense of being under siege."

In the 1990s, the democratic world, led by the United States, toppled autocratic governments in Panama and Haiti and twice made war against Milosevic's Serbia. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), well-funded by western governments, trained opposition parties and supported electoral reforms in Central and Eastern Europe and in Central Asia. In 2000, internationally financed opposition forces and international election monitors finally brought down Milosevic. Within a year he was shipped off to The Hague, and five years later he was dead in prison.

From 2003 to 2005, western democratic countries and NGOs provided pro-western and pro-democratic parties and politicians with the financing and organizational help that allowed them to topple other autocrats in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine. Europeans and Americans celebrated these revolutions and saw in them the natural unfolding of humanity's destined political evolution toward liberal democracy. But leaders in Beijing and Moscow saw these events in geopolitical terms, as western-funded, CIA-inspired coups that furthered the hegemony of America and its European allies. The upheavals in Ukraine and Georgia, Dmitri Trenin notes, "further poisoned the Russian-Western relationship" and helped to persuade the Kremlin to "complete its turnaround in foreign policy."

The color revolutions worried Putin not only because they checked his regional ambitions, but also because he feared that the examples of Ukraine and Georgia could be repeated in Russia. They convinced him by 2006 to control, restrict, and in some cases close down the activities of international NGOs. Even today he warns against the "jackals" in Russia who "got a crash course from foreign experts, got trained in neighboring republics and will try here now." His worries may seem absurd or disingenuous, but they are not misplaced. In the post-Cold War era, a triumphant liberalism has sought to expand its triumph by establishing as an international principle the right of the "international community" to intervene against sovereign states that abuse the rights of their people. International NGOs interfere in domestic politics; international organizations like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe monitor and pass judgment on elections; international legal experts talk about modifying international law to include such novel concepts as "the responsibility to protect" or a "voluntary sovereignty waiver."

In theory, these innovations apply to everyone. In practice, they chiefly provide democratic nations the right to intervene in the affairs of non-democratic nations. Unfortunately for China, Russia, and other autocracies, this is one area where there is no great transatlantic divide. The United States, though traditionally jealous of its own sovereignty, has always been ready to interfere in the internal affairs of other nations. The nations of Europe, once the great proponents (in theory) of the Westphalian order of inviolable state sovereignty, have now reversed course and produced a system, as Robert Cooper has observed, of constant "mutual interference in each other's domestic affairs, right down to beer and sausages." This has become one of the great schisms in the international system dividing the democratic world and the autocracies. For three centuries, international law, with its strictures against interference in the internal affairs of nations, has tended to protect autocracies. Now the democratic world is in the process of removing that protection, while the autocrats rush to defend the principle of sovereign inviolability.

For this reason, the war in Kosovo in 1999 was a more dramatic and disturbing turning point for Russia and China than was the Iraq war of 2003. Both nations opposed NATO's intervention, and not only because China's embassy was bombed by an American warplane and Russia's distant Slavic cousins in Serbia were on the receiving end of the NATO air campaign. When Russia threatened to block military action at the U.N. Security Council, NATO simply sidestepped the United Nations and took it upon itself to authorize action, thus negating one of Russia's few tools of international influence. From Moscow's perspective, it was a clear violation of international law, not only because the war lacked a U.N. imprimatur but because it was an intervention into a sovereign nation that had committed no external aggression. To the Chinese, it was just "liberal hegemonism." Years later Putin was still insisting that the western nations "leave behind this disdain for international law" and not attempt to "substitute NATO or the EU for the U.N."

The Russians and the Chinese were in good company. At the time, no less an authority than Henry Kissinger warned that "the abrupt abandonment of the concept of national sovereignty" risked a world unmoored from any notion of international legal order. The United States, of course, paid this little heed: it had intervened and overthrown sovereign governments dozens of times throughout its history. But even postmodern Europe set aside legal niceties in the interest of what it regarded as a higher Enlightenment morality. As Robert Cooper puts it, Europe was driven to act by "the collective memory of the Holocaust and the streams of displaced people created by extreme nationalism in the Second World War." This "common historical experience" provided all the justification necessary. Kissinger warned that in a world of "competing truths, " such a doctrine risked chaos. Cooper responded that postmodern Europe was "no longer a zone of competing truths."

But the conflict between international law and liberal morality is one that the democracies have not been able to finesse. As Chinese officials asked at the time of Tiananmen Square and have continued to ask, "What right does the U. S. government have to ... flagrantly interfere in China's internal affairs?" What right, indeed? Only the liberal creed grants the right--the belief that all men are created equal and have certain inalienable rights that must not be abridged by governments; that governments derive their power and legitimacy only from the consent of the governed and have a duty to protect their citizens' right to life, liberty, and property. To those who share this liberal faith, foreign policies and even wars that defend these principles, as in Kosovo, can be right even if established international law says they are wrong. But to the Chinese, the Russians, and others who do not share this worldview, the United States and its democratic allies succeed in imposing their views on others not because they are right but only because they are powerful enough to do so. To non-liberals, the international liberal order is not progress. It is oppression.

This is more than a dispute over theory and the niceties of international jurisprudence. It concerns the fundamental legitimacy of governments, which for autocrats can be a matter of life and death. China's rulers have not forgotten that if the democratic world had had its way in 1989, they would now be out of office, possibly imprisoned or worse. Putin complains that "we are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law," and he does not mean just the illegal use of force but also the imposition of "economic, political, cultural and educational policies." He decries the way "independent legal norms" are being re-shaped to conform to "one state's legal system," that of the western democracies, and the way international institutions such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have become "vulgar instruments" in the hands of the democracies. As a result, Putin exclaims, "no one feels safe! Because no one can feel that international law is like a stone wall that will protect them."

The western democracies would deny any such intention, but Putin, like the leaders of China, is right to worry. American and European policymakers constantly say they want Russia and China to integrate themselves into the international liberal democratic order, but it is not surprising if Russian and Chinese leaders are wary. How can autocrats enter the liberal international order without succumbing to the forces of liberalism?

III.

Afraid of the answer, the autocracies are understandably pushing back, and with some effect. Rather than accepting the new principles of diminished sovereignty and weakened international protection for autocrats, Russia and China are promoting an international order that places a high value on national sovereignty and can protect autocratic governments from foreign interference.

And they are succeeding. Autocracy is making a comeback. Changes in the ideological complexion of the most influential world powers have always had some effect on the choices made by leaders in smaller nations. Fascism was in vogue in Latin America in the 1930s and 1940s partly because it seemed successful in Italy, Germany, and Spain. Communism spread in the Third World in the 1960s and the 1970s not so much because the Soviet Union worked hard to spread it, but because government opponents fought their rebellions under the banner of Marxism-Leninism and then enlisted the aid of Moscow. When communism died in Moscow, communist rebellions around the world became few and far between. And if the rising power of the world's democracies in the late years of the Cold War, culminating in their almost total victory after 1989, contributed to the wave of democratization in the 1980s and 1990s, it is logical to expect that the rise of two powerful autocracies should shift the balance back again.

It is a mistake to believe that autocracy has no international appeal. Thanks to decades of remarkable growth, the Chinese today can argue that their model of economic development, which combines an increasingly open economy with a closed political system, can be a successful option for development in many nations. It certainly offers a model for successful autocracy, a template for creating wealth and stability without having to give way to political liberalization. Russia's model of "sovereign democracy" is attractive among the autocrats of Central Asia. Some Europeans worry that Russia is "emerging as an ideological alternative to the EU that offers a different approach to sovereignty, power and world order." In the 1980s and 1990s, the autocratic model seemed like a losing proposition as dictatorships of both right and left fell before the liberal tide. Today, thanks to the success of China and Russia, it looks like a better bet.

China and Russia may no longer actively export an ideology, but they do offer autocrats somewhere to run when the democracies turn hostile. When Iran's relations with Europe plummeted in the 1990s after its clerics issued a fatwa calling for the death of Salman Rushdie, the influential Iranian leader Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani made a point of noting how much easier it is to maintain good relations with a nation like China. When the dictator of Uzbekistan came under criticism in 2005 from the administration of George W. Bush for violently suppressing an opposition rally, he responded by joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and moving closer to Moscow. The Chinese provide unfettered aid to dictatorships in Asia and Africa, undermining the efforts of the "international community" to press for reforms--which in practical terms often means regime change--in countries such as Burma and Zimbabwe. Americans and Europeans may grumble, but autocracies are not in the business of overthrowing other autocrats at the democratic world's insistence. The Chinese, who used deadly force to crack down on student demonstrators not so long ago, will hardly help the West remove a government in Burma for doing the same thing. Nor will they impose conditions on aid to African nations to demand political and institutional reforms they have no intention of carrying out in China.

Chinese officials may chide Burma's rulers, and they may urge the Sudanese government to find some solution to the Sudan conflict. Moscow may at times distance itself from Iran. But the rulers in Rangoon, Khartoum, Pyongyang, and Tehran know that their best protectors--and in the last resort, their only protectors--in a generally hostile world are to be found in Beijing and Moscow. One wonders how much Beijing officials can chastise Burmese generals for crushing Buddhist monks' protests when the Chinese are themselves crushing Buddhist monks in Tibet. In the great schism between democracy and autocracy, the autocrats share common interests and a common view of international order. As China's Li Peng told Iran's Rafsanjani, China and Iran are united by a common desire to build a world order in which "the selection of whatever social system by a country is the affair of the people of that country."

In fact, a global competition is under way. According to Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, "For the first time in many years, a real competitive environment has emerged on the market of ideas" between different "value systems and development models." And the good news, from the Russian point of view, is that "the West is losing its monopoly on the globalization process." Today when Russians speak of a multipolar world, they are not only talking about the redistribution of power. It is also the competition of value systems and ideas that will provide "the foundation for a multipolar world order."

This comes as a surprise to a democratic world that believed such competition ended when the Berlin Wall fell. The world's democracies do not regard their own efforts to support democracy and Enlightenment principles abroad as an aspect of a geopolitical competition, because they do not see "competing truths," only "universal values." As a result, they are not always conscious of how they use their wealth and power to push others to accept their values and their principles.

In their own international institutions and alliances, they demand strict fidelity to liberal democratic principles. Before opening their doors to new members and providing the vast benefits that membership offers in terms of wealth and security, they demand that nations that want to enter the EU or NATO open up their economies and political systems. When the Georgian president called a state of emergency at the end of 2007, he damaged Georgia's chances of entering NATO and the EU anytime soon. As a result, Georgia may now live precariously in the nether region between Russian autocracy and European liberalism. Eventually, if the democracies turn their backs on Georgia, it may have no choice but to accommodate Moscow.

Again, this competition is not the Cold War redux. It is more like the nineteenth century redux. In the nineteenth century, the absolutist rulers of Russia and Austria shored up fellow autocracies in post-revolutionary France and used force to suppress liberal rebellions in Germany, Poland, Italy, and Spain. Palmerston's Britain used British power to aid liberals on the continent; the United States cheered on liberal revolutions in Hungary and Germany and expressed outrage when Russian troops suppressed liberal forces in Poland. Today Ukraine has already been a battleground between forces supported by the West and forces supported by Russia, and it could well be a battleground again in the future. Georgia could be another. It is worth contemplating what the world would look like, what Europe would look like, if democratic movements in Ukraine and Georgia failed or were forcefully suppressed, and the two nations became autocracies with close ties to Moscow. It is worth considering what the effect would be in East Asia if China used force to quash a democratic system in Taiwan and install a friendlier autocracy in its place.

The global competition between democratic governments and autocratic governments will become a dominant feature of the twenty-first-century world. The great powers are increasingly choosing sides and identifying themselves with one camp or the other. India, which during the Cold War was proudly neutral or even pro-Soviet, has begun to identify itself as part of the democratic West. Japan in recent years has also gone out of its way to position itself as a democratic great power, sharing common values with other Asian democracies but also with non-Asian democracies. For both Japan and India the desire to be part of the democratic world is genuine, but it is also part of a geopolitical calculation--a way of cementing solidarity with other great powers that can be helpful in their strategic competition with autocratic China.

There is no perfect symmetry in international affairs. The twin realities of the present era--great power competition and the contest between democracy and autocracy--will not always produce the same alignments. Democratic India in its geopolitical competition with autocratic China supports the Burmese dictatorship in order to deny Beijing a strategic advantage. India's diplomats enjoy playing the other great powers against each other, sometimes warming to Russia, sometimes to China. Democratic Greece and Cyprus pursue close relations with Russia partly out of cultural solidarity with Eastern Orthodox cousins, but more out of economic interest. The United States has long allied itself with Arab dictatorships for strategic and economic reasons, as well as to successive military rulers in Pakistan. As in the Cold War, strategic and economic considerations, as well as cultural affinities, may often cut against ideology.

But in today's world, a nation's form of government, not its "civilization" or its geographical location, may be the best predictor of its geopolitical alignment. Asian democracies today line up with European democracies against Asian autocracies. Chinese observers see a "V-shaped belt" of pro-American democratic powers "stretching from Northeast to Central Asia." When the navies of India, the United States, Japan, Australia, and Singapore exercised in the Bay of Bengal last year, Chinese and other observers referred to it as the "axis of democracy." Japan's prime minister spoke of an "Asian arc of freedom and prosperity" stretching from Japan to Indonesia to India. Russian officials profess to be "alarmed" that NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe are "reproducing a bloc policy" not unlike that of the Cold War era, but the Russians themselves refer to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as an "anti-NATO" alliance and a "Warsaw Pact 2." When the Shanghai Cooperation Organization met last year, it brought together five autocracies--China, Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan--as well as Iran. When the ASEAN nations attempted to address the problem of Burma last year, the organization split down the middle, with democratic nations like the Philippines and Indonesia, backed by Japan, seeking to put pressure on Burma, and the autocracies of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, backed by China, seeking to avoid setting a precedent that could come back to haunt them someday.

IV.

The global divisions between the club of autocrats and the axis of democracy have broad implications for the international system. Is it possible any longer to speak of an "international community"? The term implies agreement on international norms of behavior, an international morality, even an international conscience. But today the world's major powers lack such a common understanding. On the large strategic questions, such as whether to intervene or to impose sanctions or to attempt to isolate nations diplomatically, there is no longer an international community to be summoned or led. This was exposed most blatantly in the war over Kosovo, which divided the democratic West from both Russia and China, and from many other non-European autocracies. Today it is apparent on the issues of Darfur, Iran, and Burma.

One would imagine that on such transnational issues as disease, poverty, and climate change the great powers ought to be able to work together despite their diverging interests and worldviews. But even here their differences complicate matters. Disputes between the democracies and China over how and whether to condition aid to poor countries in Africa affect the struggle against poverty. Geopolitical calculations affect international negotiations over the best response to climate change. The Chinese, along with the Indians, believe the advanced industrial nations of the West, having reached their present heights after decades of polluting the air and emitting unconscionable levels of greenhouse gases, now want to deny others the right to grow in the same way. Beijing suspects a western attempt to restrict China's growth and to slow its emergence as a competitive great power. Similarly, the nuclear nonproliferation regime will continue to suffer as the clashing interests of great powers and differing forms of government overwhelm what might otherwise be their common interests in preventing other nations from obtaining nuclear weapons. Russia and China have run interference for Iran. The United States has run interference for India, in order to enlist New Delhi's help in the strategic competition with China.

The demise of the international community is most clearly on display at the U.N. Security Council, which, after a brief post-Cold War awakening, is slipping back into its long coma. The artful diplomacy of France and the tactical caution of China for a while obscured the fact that on most major issues the Security Council has been sharply divided between the autocracies and the democracies, with the latter systematically pressing for sanctions and other punitive actions against autocracies in Iran, North Korea, Sudan, and Burma, and the former just as systematically resisting and attempting to weaken the effect of such actions. This rut will only deepen in the coming years.

Calls for a new "concert" of nations including Russia, China, the United States, Europe, and other great powers are unlikely to be successful. The early-nineteenth-century Concert of Europe operated under the umbrella of a common morality and shared principles of government. It aimed not only at the preservation of a European peace but also, and more important, at the maintenance of a monarchical and aristocratic order against the liberal and radical challenges presented by the French and American revolutions and their echoes in Germany, Italy, and Poland. The concert gradually broke down under the strains of popular nationalism, fueled in part by the rise of revolutionary liberalism. The great power concert that Franklin Roosevelt established at the U.N. Security Council similarly foundered on ideological conflict.

And now, once more, there is little sense of shared morality and common values among the great powers. Instead there is suspicion and growing hostility, and the well-grounded view on the part of the autocracies that the democracies, whatever they say, would welcome their overthrow. Any concert among these states would be built on a shaky foundation likely to collapse at the first serious test.

Can these disagreements be overcome by expanding trade ties and growing economic interdependence in this ever more globalized world? Clearly economic ties can help to check tendencies toward great-power conflict. Chinese leaders avoid confrontation with the United States today both because they could not count on a victory and because they fear the impact on the Chinese economy and, by extension, the stability of their autocratic rule. American, Australian, and Japanese dependence on the Chinese economy makes these nations cautious, too, and the powerful influence of American big business makes American leaders take a more accommodating view of China. In both China and Russia, economic interests are not just national, they are also personal. If the business of Russia is business, as Dmitri Trenin argues, then its leaders should be reluctant to jeopardize their wealth with risky foreign policies.

Yet history has not been kind to the theory that strong trade ties prevent conflict among nations. The United States and China are no more dependent on each other's economies today than were Great Britain and Germany before World War I. And trade relations are not without their own tensions and conflicts. Those between the United States and China are becoming increasingly contentious, with Congress threatening legislation to punish China for perceived inequities in the trade relationship. In both Europe and the United States, concerns about the growing strategic challenge from China are increasingly joined or even outstripped by fears of the growing economic challenge it poses. Fifty-five percent of Germans believe China's economic growth is a "bad thing," up from 38 percent in 2005, a view shared by Americans, Indians, Britons, the French, and even South Koreans. Today 60 percent of South Koreans think China's growing economy is a "bad thing."

The Chinese, meanwhile, may still tolerate pressure to adjust their currency, crack down on piracy, and increase quality standards for their products, as well as all the other hectoring they receive from the United States and Europe. But they are starting to feel that the democratic world is ganging up on them and using these disputes as a way of containing China not only economically but strategically. And there is also the matter of the international scramble for energy resources, which is becoming the primary arena for geopolitical competition. The search for reliable sources of oil and gas shapes China's policies toward Iran, Sudan, Burma, and Central Asia. Russia and the democracies led by the United States compete to build oil and gas pipelines that will provide them leverage and influence, or deny it to their competitors.

Commercial ties alone cannot withstand the forces of national and ideological competition that have now so prominently re-emerged. Trade relations do not take place in a vacuum. They both influence and are influenced by geopolitical and ideological conflicts. Nations are not calculating machines. They have the attributes of the humans who create and live in them, the intangible and immeasurable human qualities of love, hate, ambition, fear, honor, shame, patriotism, ideology, and belief--the things people fight and die for, today as in millennia past.

V.

Nowhere are these human qualities more on display than in the Islamic world, especially the Middle East. The struggle of radical Islamists against the powerful and often impersonal forces of modernization, capitalism, and globalization that they associate with the Judeo-Christian West is the other great conflict in the international system today. It is also the most dramatic refutation of the convergence paradigm, since it is precisely convergence, including the liberal world's conception of "universal values," that the radical Islamists reject.

As a historical phenomenon, the struggle between modernization and Islamic radicalism may ultimately have less impact on international affairs than the struggle among the great powers and between the forces of democracy and autocracy. After all, Islamic resistance to westernization is not a new phenomenon, though it has taken on a new and potentially cataclysmic dimension. In the past, when old and less technologically advanced peoples confronted more advanced cultures, their inadequate weapons reflected their backwardness. Today the more radical proponents of Islamic traditionalism, though they abhor the modern world, are using against it not only the ancient methods of assassination and suicidal attacks, but also modern weapons. The forces of modernization and globalization have inflamed the radical Islamist rebellion and also armed them for the fight.

But it is a lonely and ultimately desperate fight, for in the struggle between traditionalism and modernity, tradition cannot win--even though traditional forces armed with modern weapons, technologies, and ideologies can do horrendous damage. All the world's rich and powerful nations have more or less embraced the economic, technological, and even social aspects of modernization and globalization. All have embraced, with varying degrees of complaint and resistance, the free flow of goods, finances, and services and the intermingling of cultures and lifestyles that characterizes the modern world. Increasingly, their people watch the same television shows, listen to the same music, and go to the same movies. Along with this dominant modern culture, they have accepted--even as they may also deplore--the essential characteristics of a modern ethics and aesthetics. Modernity means, among other things, the sexual as well as political and economic liberation of women; the weakening of church authority and the strengthening of secularism; the existence of what used to be called the counterculture; and the exercise of free expression in the arts (if not in politics), which includes the freedom to commit blasphemy and to lampoon symbols of faith, authority, and morality. These are the consequences of liberalism and capitalism unleashed and unchecked by the constraining hand of tradition, or a powerful church, or a moralistic and domineering government. Even the Chinese have learned that while it is possible to have capitalism without political liberalization, it is much harder.

Today, radical Islamists are the last holdout against these powerful forces of modernity. For Sayyid Qutb, one of the intellectual fathers of Al Qaeda, true Islam could be salvaged only by warring against the modern world on all fronts. He wanted to "take apart the entire political and philosophical structure of modernity and return Islam to its unpolluted origins." A very different kind of Muslim leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, clearly identified modernity with the Enlightenment and rejected both. "Yes, we are reactionaries, " he told his opponents, "and you are enlightened intellectuals: You intellectuals do not want us to go back 1,400 years."

These most radical Islamists, along with Osama bin Laden, also reject that great product of the Enlightenment and modernity: democracy. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi denounced elections in Iraq on the grounds that "the legislator who must be obeyed in a democracy is man, and not God." Democratic elections were "the very essence of heresy and polytheism and error," for they made "the weak, ignorant man God's partner in His most central divine prerogative--namely, ruling and legislating." As Bernard Lewis has written, the aim of Islamic revolution in Iran and elsewhere has been to "sweep away all the alien and infidel accretions that had been imposed on the Muslim lands and peoples in the era of alien dominance and influence and to restore the true and divinely given Islamic order." One of those "infidel accretions" is democracy. The fundamentalists want to take the Islamic world back to where it was before the Christian West, liberalism, and modernity polluted what they regard as pure Islam.

Their goal is impossible to achieve. The Islamists could not take their societies back 1,400 years even if the rest of the world would let them. And it will not let them. Neither the United States nor any of the other great powers will turn over control of the Middle East to these fundamentalist forces. Partly this is because the region is of such vital strategic importance to the rest of the world. But it is more than that. The vast majority of the people in the Middle East have no desire to go back 1,400 years. They oppose neither modernity nor democracy. Nor is it conceivable in this modern world that a whole country could wall itself off from modernity, even if the majority wanted to do so. Could the great Islamic theocracy that Al Qaeda and others hope to erect ever completely block out the sights and sounds of the rest of the world, and thereby shield its people from the temptations of modernity? The mullahs have not even succeeded in doing that in Iran. The project is fantastic.

The world is thus faced with the prospect of a protracted struggle in which the goals of the extreme Islamists can never be satisfied because neither the United States, nor Europe, nor Russia, nor China, nor the peoples of the Middle East have the ability or the desire to give them what they want. The modern great powers will never retreat as far as the Islamic extremists require. Unfortunately, they may also not be capable of uniting effectively against the threat. Although in the struggle between modernization and tradition the United States, Russia, China, Europe, and the other great powers are roughly on the same side, the things that divide them from one another--the competing national ambitions, the divisions between democrats and autocrats, the transatlantic disagreement over the use of military power--undermine their will to cooperate.

This is certainly true when it comes to the unavoidable military aspects of a fight against radical Islamic terrorism. Europeans have been and will continue to be less than enthusiastic about what they emphatically do not call "the war on terror." As for Russia and China, it will be tempting for them to enjoy the spectacle of the United States bogged down in a fight with Al Qaeda and other violent Islamist groups in the Middle East and South Asia, just as it is tempting to let American power in that region be checked by a nuclear-armed Iran. The willingness of the autocrats in Moscow and Beijing to protect their fellow autocrats in Pyongyang, Tehran, and Khartoum increases the chances that the connection between terrorists and nuclear weapons will eventually be made.

Indeed, one of the problems with making the struggle against Islamic terrorism the sole focus of American foreign policy is that it produces illusions about alliance and cooperation with other great powers with whom genuine alliance is becoming impossible. The idea of genuine strategic cooperation between the United States and Russia or the United States and China in the war on terror is mostly a fiction. For Russia, the war on terror is about Chechnya. For China, it is about the Uighurs of Xinjiang province. But when it comes to Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, Russia and China tend to see not terrorists but useful partners in the great power struggle.

The great fallacy of our era has been the belief that a liberal international order rests on the triumph of ideas alone, or on the natural unfolding of human progress. It is an immensely attractive notion, deeply rooted in the Enlightenment worldview of which all of us in the liberal world are the product. Our political scientists posit theories of modernization, with sequential stages of political and economic development that lead upward toward liberalism. Our political philosophers imagine a grand historical dialectic, in which the battle of worldviews over the centuries produces, in the end, the correct liberal democratic answer. Naturally, many are inclined to believe that the Cold War ended the way it did simply because the better worldview triumphed, and that the international order that exists today is but the next stage forward in humanity's march from strife and aggression toward a peaceful and prosperous co-existence.

Such illusions are just true enough to be dangerous. Of course there is strength in the liberal democratic idea, and in the free market. It is logical, too, that a world of liberal democratic states would gradually produce an international order that reflected those liberal and democratic qualities. This has been the enlightenment dream since the eighteenth century, when Kant imagined a "perpetual peace" consisting of liberal republics and built upon the natural desire of all peoples for peace and material comfort. Although some may scoff, it has been a remarkably compelling vision. Its spirit animated the international arbitration movements at the end of the nineteenth century, the worldwide enthusiasm for a League of Nations in the early twentieth century, and the enthusiasm for the United Nations after World War II. It has also been a remarkably durable vision, withstanding the horrors of two world wars, one more disastrous than the other, and then a long Cold War that for a third time dashed expectations of progress toward the ideal.

It is a testament to the vitality of this Enlightenment vision that hopes for a brand new era in human history again took hold with such force after the fall of Soviet communism. But a little more skepticism was in order. After all, had mankind really progressed so far? The most destructive century in all the millennia of human history was only just concluding; it was not buried in some deep, dark ancient past. Our supposedly enlightened modernity had produced the greatest of horrors--the massive aggressions, the "total wars," the famines, the genocides, the nuclear warfare. After the recognition of this terrible reality--the relationship of modernity not only to good but also to evil--what reason was there to believe that humankind was suddenly on the cusp of a brand new order? The focus on the dazzling pageant of progress at the end of the Cold War ignored the wires and the beams--the actual historical scaffolding--that had made such progress possible. It failed to acknowledge that progress toward liberalism was not inevitable, but was contingent on events--battles won or lost, social movements successful or crushed, economic policies implemented or discarded. The spread of democracy was not merely the unfolding of certain ineluctable processes of economic and political development. We do not know whether such an evolutionary process--with predictable stages, with known causes and effects--even exists.

What we do know is that the global shift toward liberal democracy coincided with the historical shift in the balance of power toward those nations and peoples who favored the liberal democratic idea, a shift that began with the triumph of the democratic powers over fascism in World War II and that was followed by a second triumph of the democracies over communism in the Cold War. The liberal international order that emerged after these two victories reflected the new overwhelming global balance in favor of liberal forces. But those victories were not inevitable, and they need not be lasting. Now the re-emergence of the great autocratic powers, along with the reactionary forces of Islamic radicalism, has weakened that order, and threatens to weaken it further in the years and decades to come. The world's democracies need to begin thinking about how they can protect their interests and advance their principles in a world in which these are, once again, powerfully contested.