DEFENDING THE GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEM FROM AUTHORITARIAN ASSAULT:

HOW DEMOCRACIES CAN RETAKE THE INITIATIVE

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NED NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY
SUPPORTING FREEDOM AROUND THE WORLD

FORUM INTERNATIONAL FORUM FOR DEMOCRATIC STUDIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Authoritarian influence in multilateral institutions—particularly the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC)—is growing rapidly and poses a serious threat to democratic and human rights principles. Repressive governments have worked to undermine mechanisms that are meant to ensure accountability for rights abuses and to transform the United Nations (UN) its related bodies, and other international institutions into fora for mutual praise and exculpation.

Both the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Kremlin are working to subvert human rights norms on the international stage, peddle favorable narratives, and oppose resolutions examining their poor human rights records. They also constitute the most notable part of the Like-Minded Group (LMG), a voting cohort in the UN composed primarily of autocracies that acts collectively to constrain the international human rights system.

It is in the vital interest of democratic societies to rally behind the global human rights system and ensure that it remains capable of assisting activists and victims around the world, even in the most repressive environments. A robust response from democracies could be built around the following steps:

1. **Maximize democratic membership and leave no seats uncontested.** To better guard the UN Human Rights Council membership and democratic principles, countries with a proven commitment to democracy should be encouraged to run as often as they can so that the ballot always features candidates with strong human rights records. Moreover, democratic states should coordinate and plan several cycles ahead to take advantage of key elections and commit to campaign for one another.
2. **Work together with a broad range of countries to advance shared goals.** In order to spur collaboration among supporters of human rights, democratic states should make a concerted effort to build cross-regional alliances and identify initiatives that can attract a diverse range of partners. In addition, they should look to form nimble, flexible groupings that address narrower but highly salient topics, such as electoral integrity or civil society participation.

3. **Build partnerships with more democratic Like-Minded Group (LMG) states to reduce authoritarian influence.** Democracies should make a special effort to cultivate diverse coalitions dedicated to issues that are of interest to developing nations within the LMG, including racism, inequality, and climate change. Such action would help counteract efforts by Beijing and its authoritarian partners to create divisions between wealthier democracies and the developing world, and it would discredit LMG arguments about Western "human rights imperialism."
4. **Mobilize transnational civil society networks to drive a democratic agenda.** Civil society activists and human rights organizations from the developing world should be engaged directly, and democratic governments should invest resources to build the capacity and expertise of such partners, enabling them to track and report on authoritarian influence within the global human rights system and develop innovative responses.
5. **Develop new tools to document and expose authoritarian attacks on accountability mechanisms.** Given the ways in which repressive governments have worked to shield one another from existing human rights mechanisms, states that are committed to upholding human rights should develop and deploy new monitoring tools that can put a spotlight on efforts to evade accountability. A similar reporting mechanism could be dedicated to the recent upsurge in incidents of transnational repression.
6. **Muster resources and political will to match the magnitude of the authoritarian challenge.** Authoritarian regimes devote considerable resources, energy, and attention to subverting multilateral institutions that are designed to uphold human rights and democratic principles. In order to uphold democratic principles in international institutions, the world's democracies must match and exceed authoritarian investments, political will, and diplomatic energy and can do so by incorporating their democracy support funding into a long-term strategy.

Without a vigorous democratic response, PRC, Kremlin, and other authoritarian influence in multilateral institutions is likely to grow significantly, and LMG arguments could persuade an increasing number of countries to join in the debilitation of the international human rights system. The UN human rights system is worth defending because of the moral weight it carries, the accountability it provides for repressive governments, and its ability to inspire local activists. By taking the initiative, competing for positions in multilateral bodies, forging coalitions across regions and development levels, cultivating civil society networks, and investing in long-term diplomatic campaigns, democratic states would dramatically improve the outlook for global human rights mechanisms and for the expansion of human freedom.

THE GROWING THREAT OF AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCE IN MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS

Authoritarian states are on the offensive within the world's multilateral institutions, working to roll back democratic and human rights principles at the United Nations (UN), affiliated bodies like the World Health Organization, crucial intergovernmental agencies such as Interpol, and regional groupings including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).[1] Using their seats on the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in particular, repressive governments have attempted to undermine mechanisms that are meant to ensure accountability for rights abuses—including the council's special rapporteurs and other independent experts—and to transform the council itself into a forum for mutual praise and exculpation.

It took half a century for the international community to develop this network of foundational human rights treaties and systems for monitoring and enforcement, but without a robust response from democratic societies, it could take dictators only a few years to break them down. To avoid such an outcome, democratic states should renew their commitment to the architecture they helped to construct, energize their human rights diplomacy in multilateral settings, and proactively strengthen their own cooperation to match that of their authoritarian opponents, especially across regions.

The value of the international human rights regime should not be underestimated. Established liberal democracies may have their own institutional safeguards for fundamental rights, but **many nations lack domestic checks on abuse of power, and the international system serves as both a source of inspiration and a venue of last resort for citizens seeking justice and protection.** Moreover, international bodies have been critical in shaping ideas about the frontiers of human rights and catalyzing improvements in shared global standards. For example, individual UN resolutions on torture helped generate the political will that led to the adoption of the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in the 1980s and its optional protocol in 2002.[2]

If authoritarian influence is allowed to proliferate in multilateral institutions, fragile democracies will be at greater risk of backsliding in their domestic practices, and any democratic countries that still adhere to their core values will find themselves under pressure and increasingly isolated on the world stage.

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The rising phenomenon of transnational repression, in which authoritarian regimes reach beyond their own borders to suppress dissent among exiles and diaspora communities abroad, should alert even the most robust democracies to the fact they would not remain secure at home in an international environment dominated by autocrats. The Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine has added yet more urgency to the challenge, as was vividly illustrated this April, when Moscow was allowed to assume the monthly presidency of the UN Security Council even as its leadership stood accused of ongoing war crimes and crimes against humanity.

China and Russia Lead the Charge

The government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is one of the authoritarian powers leading this assault on multilateral institutions. It has lobbied other states for votes aggressively, interfered with human rights mechanisms, attempted to redefine human rights norms, employed propaganda to dismiss human rights concerns as well as advance its own narratives, and pursued key human rights–related positions within the UN system.

Under Xi Jinping, its general secretary since late 2012, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has become particularly aggressive in trying to pass UNHRC resolutions that contain extensive references to CCP concepts such as "win-win cooperation" and "the community of common destiny." **These and other such phrases sound innocuous, but they represent views that prioritize state-level cooperation over the protection of victims, national sovereignty over international law and universal values, and anemic dialogue over robust accountability for state abuses.** For example, the CCP advances narratives in the HRC that suggest developing states should be held to lower human rights standards, and that development is a prerequisite for human rights protections.[3]

The Chinese regime loathes criticism of its human rights violations and has opposed resolutions on its record vigorously, going so far as to offer generous aid to countries that vote in its favor and threatening those that resist with exclusion from its economy. Beijing has used similar tactics to take the offensive and advance its own resolutions in a bid to replace established human rights principles with a more authoritarian framework. For example, the PRC has sought to promote "cyber sovereignty"—the idea that governments should control internet infrastructure and online content within their respective national borders instead of supporting an open, global platform for the free exchange of information.[4]

The Kremlin is also acting to subvert human rights norms on multiple fronts.[5] Moscow has undercut credible international election monitoring by extensively deploying "zombie" election observers who affirm even deeply flawed elections. On the UNHRC, it has peddled false narratives that aim to reinterpret human rights standards according to its official vision of traditional social values.[6] In 2021, Russian envoys prevented the OSCE's annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting—a major human rights conference—from taking place at all by blocking the required consensus for its formal agenda.[7]

China and Russia's efforts are aided by the strong presence of authoritarian member states on the UNHRC.[8] **Beijing and Moscow actively seek membership for themselves and lavish diplomatic attention on smaller countries that might win seats and vote with them.** The current council's membership includes not only China, but also repressive states such as Vietnam, Uzbekistan, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Moreover, some authoritarian regimes maintain sizeable diplomatic missions in Geneva, which allows them to devote considerable time and resources to diplomatic lobbying and to mastering UN rules and procedures.

An Authoritarian Bloc at the UN Human Rights Council

One of the chief vehicles for authoritarian cooperation at the UNHRC is the Like-Minded Group (LMG), a cohort composed primarily of autocratic governments that works to resist scrutiny of human rights abuses.[9] The group is voluntary, informal, and malleable in nature, attracting states from multiple regions. **It consistently prioritizes sovereignty over international monitoring, even in cases of gross human rights violations; chips away at the universality of human rights by insisting on the importance of unique cultural, national, or domestic circumstances; and emphasizes technical assistance and capacity building at the expense of genuine accountability.**[10]

Many of the LMG's positions ring hollow and appear to be deployed instrumentally to hamper or thwart the human rights system. For example, while the LMG downplays civil and political rights and seeks to elevate economic, social, and cultural rights, many of its constituent states fail to provide their citizens with adequate access to education or health care. Similarly, while many claim to defend national sovereignty, the group has not spoken out about transnational repression. Finally, the LMG's insistence on the need for capacity building obscures the fact that regimes like that in the PRC have used their technical and political capabilities to increase political control, not to deliver better services to citizens.

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The LMG first emerged in the UN Commission on Human Rights—predecessor of the UNHRC—in the late 1990s and numbered just over twenty members, with China, Russia, Cuba, Pakistan, and Egypt originally acting as the core of the group. It has now come to attract the support of many more states, and includes perpetrators of severe human rights violations such as Belarus, North Korea, and Iran. While membership is not fixed and governments can choose to affiliate with group statements on a case-by-case basis, the LMG has grown to roughly fifty states rotating through the UNHRC. It includes a swath of developing nations with China, Russia, Egypt, South Africa, Cuba, Venezuela, and Pakistan usually acting as key organizers. Not all LMG members fit neatly into the authoritarian camp and some are drawn to the group by "anti-imperialist" sentiment and a sense of being wronged by "the West" rather than a zeal for authoritarian practices.

Leading LMG powers like the PRC have manipulated this sentiment by portraying expressions of concern about human rights as a form of unfair and selective scrutiny from the West. For example, Beijing has accused some special rapporteurs and other independent experts with UNHRC mandates of endorsing "lies and disinformation fabricated by Western countries" and imposing "Western dogma on others."[11]

The LMG acts collectively to constrain the international human rights system by shielding its members from scrutiny; promoting concepts and norms that excuse or encourage toleration of authoritarian practices; disrupting human rights monitoring and accountability procedures; and opposing initiatives that would strengthen rights protections.[12]

Whenever an LMG member comes under examination at the UNHRC, fellow members flood the proceedings with favorable assessments and platitudes. This behavior is especially evident during the council's Universal Periodic Review process, which is meant to review the records of all countries on a rolling basis.[13] Key states, such as Egypt, South Africa, and China, are thought to recruit votes and marshal LMG backing for such defensive action. The bloc has appeared to act with greater cohesion and coordination in recent years, with the LMG itself now issuing protective statements in addition to those offered by individual members.

The LMG resists nearly all forms of country-specific scrutiny, including the special rapporteurs and other so-called special procedures, special sessions and resolutions, and even statements from governments or UN experts expressing concern about human rights violations. As an alternative to individualized attention, the LMG prefers a thematic approach to human rights, such as broad discussions on children's rights or women's rights at a global level. The group portrays its aversion to country-specific scrutiny as a reflection of its principled resistance to foreign interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. This narrative and related lobbying have torpedoed important proposed UNHRC resolutions in recent years, including one on the CCP's severe human rights violations against ethnic Uyghurs.

Rather than holding perpetrator states accountable for abuses, the LMG's authoritarian members have called for technical assistance and capacity building repeatedly, as if any shortcomings on human rights were the result of insufficient development and not political will. For example, in 2022, despite their alleged war crimes in Yemen, the governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were able to recruit sufficient votes—many of them from LMG members—to defeat a resolution that would have continued the mandate of a Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen and its efforts to report on and investigate human rights violations associated with that country's protracted conflict. The Saudis and Emiratis instead secured passage of a toothless resolution that focused on technical assistance and

capacity building.[14] Similarly, many LMG states have countered a resolution on South Sudan that expresses serious concern with violations by promoting a softer version that emphasizes, yet again, technical assistance and capacity building.[15] In effect, the LMG is attempting to convert the international human rights regime into a mere service provider for governments.

The resources that authoritarian states dedicate to defeating country-specific scrutiny is a reminder of the potency of the UNHRC's accountability mechanisms. These governments would not make the effort if the procedures in question did not exert meaningful pressure on them. Resolutions directed at a particular country carry enormous moral weight, political symbolism, and ideational influence, placing the onus on the targeted state to improve its record.[16] Authoritarians are working to erode the system in order to make the world safe for dictatorship—and consequently dangerous for democracy. It is in the vital interest of democratic societies to rally behind the global human rights system and ensure that it remains capable of assisting activists and victims around the world, even in the most repressive environments.

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Security Council meeting on situation in the Middle East at the UN headquarters on April 25, 2023.

HOW DEMOCRACIES CAN RETAKE THE INITIATIVE

The UNHRC is not an ideal institution. Perhaps its most obvious flaw is a lack of strict and enforceable membership criteria.[17] **But democracies cannot fix it or other multilateral bodies simply by boycotting them.** In fact, doing so would allow authoritarian states to further co-opt the institutions and exploit their enduring credibility. When the United States withdrew from the UNHRC in 2018, for instance, Beijing used the opportunity to expand its influence and alliances. Some entities, such as the World Trade Organization or the Universal Postal Union, do rely on reciprocity or a critical mass of participation to function, but the UNHRC's work would continue even in the absence of democracies, and the problem of authoritarian influence would only become more pronounced.

Moreover, experience has shown that greater engagement by democracies can be effective. **When governments that are committed to defending and advancing freedom take the initiative and remain unified, they are able to resuscitate human rights work in multilateral institutions and sharpen scrutiny of repressive states.** Recent examples include the November 2022 UNHRC special session on Iranian human rights abuses, Iran's December 2022 removal from a UN women's equity and empowerment body, the April 2022 suspension of Russia's UNHRC membership, and the October 2022 creation of a special rapporteur on Russia.

While governments in many cases are best suited to undertake this effort, **turning back authoritarian influence will require action by both governments and civil society.** There are crucial roles for each sector to play as well as opportunities for cross-sector collaboration and mutual reinforcement. A robust response from democracies could be built around the following key steps.

1. Maximize democratic membership and leave no seat uncontested.

While the UNHRC lacks enforceable membership criteria and numerous authoritarian states have now held seats, **democratic governments have failed to maximize their presence even as Beijing and its allies pursue positions throughout the UN human rights system.**[18] To better guard council membership, countries with a proven commitment to democracy should be

encouraged to run as often as they can so that the ballot always features candidates with strong human rights records. Furthermore, when the world's worst violators of human rights stand for election to the UNHRC, democracies and civil society representatives should ensure that they face resistance and that their repressive actions are spotlighted.

Such opposition campaigns could focus on the "worst of the worst," or countries that receive fewer than 10 points on the 100-point scale in Freedom House's annual *Freedom in the World* report, which assesses political rights and civil liberties. Based on the report's 2023 edition, the list would include Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Central African Republic, China, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Myanmar, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Yemen.[19] **UN members should be also applauded for utilizing rules that allow for the removal of states from human rights bodies in response to gross abuses.** In addition to the more recent actions against Russia and Iran, Libya was notably suspended from the UNHRC in early 2011 as the regime of Muammar al-Qadhafi cracked down on antigovernment protests.

Democracies can also set an example by adopting more robust practices surrounding UNHRC elections. Civil society groups have argued that given the absence of hard membership criteria, states running for seats should voluntarily participate in candidate hearings that allow for an examination of their human rights records. Democracies should also avoid running "clean slates," in which the number of candidates from a given region is the same as the number of open regionally allotted seats.[20] Such noncompetitive elections make it easier for countries like the PRC and Saudi Arabia to win membership, and more difficult to hold members accountable for their performance.

In addition, free nations should identify critical upcoming vacancies for independent expert and state positions throughout the UN system—in Geneva and New York—and leave no post without a candidate with integrity and a commitment to democratic ideals. For example, any country that is a party to a human rights treaty can nominate candidates for election to the associated treaty body, which is tasked with enforcing treaty commitments and monitoring state compliance. Nominees from countries such as China and Russia are currently serving on the Committee against Torture, which oversees the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.[21] If such a competitive strategy is to be effective, **democratic states and civil society groups will need to coordinate and plan several cycles ahead to take advantage of key elections and openings.** Democracies should also commit to campaigning for one another, and for qualified nominees who are not their nationals.

2. Work together with a broad range of countries to advance shared goals.

In order to spur collaboration among supporters of human rights, democratic states should make a concerted effort to build cross-regional alliances and identify initiatives that can attract a diverse range of partners.

Although democracies have gravitated toward the protection of traditional civil and political rights for understandable reasons, they should consider increasing their attention to other issues, especially matters of growing global concern such as digital freedom and privacy rights. **A strategy that anticipates and addresses some of the potential downsides of new technologies would be particularly important,** especially in light of the fact that Beijing is actively exporting surveillance and censorship systems and attempting to shape international norms surrounding their use. **The 2019 UNHRC resolution on the right to privacy in the digital age, which was jointly introduced by Brazil and Germany, is a prime example of a meaningful initiative that responds to emerging global needs.**[22] Democracies should also devote greater attention to economic, social, and cultural rights, whose repression is often linked to authoritarian political priorities—as demonstrated by Beijing's use of forced labor by Uyghurs.

Democratic states should make a concerted effort to build cross-regional alliances and identify initiatives that can attract a diverse range of partners.

While a standing group of countries committed to upholding core civil and political rights would be ideal, past efforts have been hamstrung by the difficulty of achieving alignment on wide-ranging human rights issues. An alternative approach could entail forming nimble, flexible groupings that address narrower but highly salient topics, such as electoral integrity or the participation of civil society actors. In order to ensure that these projects speak to the interests of a broad array of nations, major democratic powers like the United States and its Western European allies should encourage others to take the lead, even as they provide inspiration and support. For example, Uruguay, which championed the role of civil society in the UN Non-Governmental Organizations Committee, could be called upon to lead a group on freedom of association and civic activism.[23]

Democracies and civil society organizations can spur this sort of issue-based solidarity by conducting outreach to potential partner nations and organizations across regions, canvassing them for their ideas on potential areas of collaboration, and convening working-group discussions on the inadequacies of the current human rights regime and its future trajectory. The effort should transcend organizing around the latest resolution and become a platform for proactively identifying nascent threats and pioneering new initiatives.

3. Build partnerships with more democratic LMG states to reduce authoritarian influence.

Democracies should make a special effort to cultivate diverse coalitions dedicated to issues that are of interest to developing nations within the LMG, including racism, inequality, and climate change. Such action would help counteract efforts by Beijing and its authoritarian partners to create divisions between wealthier democracies and the developing world, and it would discredit LMG arguments about Western "human rights imperialism." While democratic governments with UNHRC seats will be the main drivers of the effort, civil society can play a supporting role by conceiving and sponsoring events to generate ideas for collaboration and to identify new directions and unmet human rights needs.

Democracies should make a special effort to cultivate diverse coalitions dedicated to issues that are of interest to developing nations within the LMG, including racism, inequality, and climate change.

This engagement with developing countries, including LMG members, is crucially important for any effective response to the authoritarian assault on multilateral institutions, as success cannot be achieved by established democracies alone. Although the LMG includes some of the world's most tyrannical regimes, a number of its other adherents are rated Partly Free or even Free in Freedom House's report. **By finding common ground and building goodwill with these more democratic developing states, established democracies could ease some of them away from the LMG and diminish the influence of authoritarian powers.**

Leading democracies should underscore that these overtures to developing nations are not driven by geopolitics, which would force potential partners into the uncomfortable position of picking sides. Instead the emphasis should be on shared interests and values, with democracies making the case that many LMG positions ultimately harm human flourishing, global peace, and political stability. The United States recently demonstrated an ability to organize this kind of cross-regional coalition at the UN Economic and Social Council, where more than twenty states overcame authoritarian resistance and secured UN consultative status for NGOs from a number of countries whose applications had been blocked by repressive governments.[24]

4. Mobilize transnational civil society networks to drive a democratic agenda.

The regionally diverse coalitions recommended above should not be limited to governments or government-sponsored action at the UNHRC. **Civil society activists and human rights organizations from the developing world should be engaged directly**, and **democratic governments should invest resources to build the capacity and expertise of such partners**, enabling them to track and report on authoritarian influence within the global human rights system and develop innovative responses.

There are opportunities to work with civil society, domestic media outlets, and members of parliament in certain LMG states, with the aim of holding their governments accountable for aligning with dictatorial regimes and imperiling international human rights mechanisms. In some of these settings, the government's diplomatic collaboration with the leaders of countries like Belarus, Iran, and Syria is becoming increasingly unpopular as citizens draw connections to their own struggles against injustice. International civil society groups—especially those with greater resources, extensive contacts in Geneva, and expertise on the human rights system—could provide valuable assistance to their counterparts in the developing world. Such assistance might take the form of sponsorship programs that bring advocates to Geneva, or training for promising local civic leaders who might shift the views of their compatriots.

5. Develop new tools to document and expose authoritarian attacks on accountability mechanisms.

Given the ways in which repressive governments have worked to shield one another from existing human rights mechanisms, **states that are committed to upholding human rights should develop and deploy new monitoring tools that can put a spotlight on efforts to evade accountability.** For example, the passage of UNHRC Resolution 24/24 in 2013 led to the creation of a regular report that catalogues the problem of repressive governments engaging in reprisals against individuals who turn to the UN system to report human rights abuses.[25]

A similar reporting mechanism could be dedicated to the recent upsurge in incidents of transnational repression. These authoritarian attempts to harass and intimidate exiled dissidents and members of diaspora communities have spread to a growing number of countries, including democracies that might otherwise be considered safe havens. Exile and diaspora populations often play a crucial part in addressing rights violations in their countries of origin, and exposing any efforts to silence them would strengthen the international human rights system as a whole.

6. Muster resources and political will to match the magnitude of the authoritarian challenge.

Because **authoritarian regimes view international human rights monitoring as a threat to their survival,** they devote considerable resources, energy, and attention to subverting multilateral institutions that are designed to uphold human rights and democratic principles. Yet the governments that were founded on those same rights and principles have often neglected multilateral bodies or viewed diplomacy in this arena as inconsequential. Even democratic civil society has devoted inadequate resources to the sector. **The world's democracies must match and exceed authoritarian investments, political will, and diplomatic energy and can do so by starting with incorporating their funding into a long-term strategy.**

They can begin by staffing up their missions to the UNHRC, expanding their diplomats' expertise, and strengthening relationships with other missions in Geneva. As of 2022, the Chinese mission employed 81 staff, and the Russian mission had 62, while the United States had only 44.[26]

The governments of the PRC, Cuba, and other members of the LMG have also encouraged their diplomats to serve multiple tours in Geneva, enabling them to master UN rules, procedures, and lobbying of other member states. **This imbalance in resources and experience enables Beijing to secure votes for its initiatives and to protect itself and others from scrutiny.** It has demonstrated an ability to mobilize votes in less than 24 hours.

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Bolstering the size of their missions in Geneva would allow democratic governments to implement some of the recommendations above, such as engaging in diplomacy with smaller or poorer nations that are exposed to authoritarian influence. An expanded diplomatic presence would further position democracies to combat false narratives and manipulation of debates at the UN proactively. For example, they could contest LMG rhetoric that portrays country-specific scrutiny as an infringement on sovereignty by arguing that it is a way to protect the most vulnerable. They could similarly use their increased capacity to amplify the message that the best way to secure development is through accountable, transparent, and democratic governance with strong and independent safeguards against corruption.

In addition to expanding their own staffing, **democratic governments and civil society could advocate for or support much more robust resources for UN experts and special rapporteurs,** with the means to carry out multiple country visits per year and engage in more detailed, sustained documentation than is currently possible. Democratic nations could focus in particular on key Special Procedures, such as the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the Special Rapporteurs on Human Rights Defenders; Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; Counter-terrorism and Human Rights; and Freedom of Opinion or Expression.[27]

Finally, **champions of human rights and democratic principles in multilateral institutions will need to show a commitment that can be sustained across different administrations or changes in political leadership.** Democratic responses to authoritarian influence have often been sporadic and piecemeal, and this inconsistent action will not be sufficient to counter a threat posed by rulers who are unincumbered by term limits and confident in their ability to play the long game.

For example, each time the mandate of a special rapporteur or other special procedure comes up for renewal, authoritarian states have an opportunity to gradually dilute the substance of their mission. LMG members, particularly Egypt, have repeatedly attempted to shift the mandate of the special

rapporteur on counterterrorism and human rights away from the risk that counterterrorism efforts could infringe on human rights and toward the negative effect of terrorism itself on the enjoyment of human rights. Repressive governments commonly use counterterrorism as a pretext to clamp down on dissent or label human rights defenders as "terrorists," underscoring the importance of this special rapporteur's original mandate. **To prevent a watering down of the special procedures, democracies must be constantly vigilant and poised to uphold strong mandates when they come up for renewal.**

UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, Anais Marin, speaking via video message during a meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Council on allegations of torture and other serious violations in the country on September 18, 2020 in Geneva.

THE HIGH STAKES OF SUCCESS OR FAILURE

Without a vigorous democratic response, the influence of China and other authoritarian states in multilateral institutions is likely to grow significantly, and LMG arguments could persuade an increasing number of countries to join in the debilitation of the international human rights system. This would entail the diminished use of some tools, such as country-specific human rights scrutiny; the actual loss of certain monitoring and enforcement mechanisms; and the watering down of human rights norms overall. **Such deterioration would put some of the world's most vulnerable people—including ethnic minorities and dissidents in closed societies—in even greater danger.** Furthermore, prolonged inaction by democracies will only make the systemic damage more difficult to halt and reverse.

The UN human rights system is worth defending because of the moral weight it carries, the accountability it provides for repressive governments, and its ability to inspire local activists. But beyond the worthiness of the endeavor, democracies should be reminded that the system can be successfully defended in practice. By taking the initiative, competing for positions in multilateral bodies, forging coalitions across regions and development levels, cultivating civil society networks, and investing in long-term diplomatic campaigns, democratic states would dramatically improve the outlook for global human rights mechanisms and for the expansion of human freedom in general.

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ENDNOTES

1 For more information, please consult the following sources: Edward Lemon, "Weaponizing Interpol," *Journal of Democracy*, 30, no. 2 (April 2019): 15-29, www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/weaponizing-interpol/; Stephanie Liechtenstein, "Will Russia Kill the OSCE?" *Foreign Policy,* 29 November 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/29/osce-russia-putin-armenia-azerbaijan/; and Joe McDonald, "China Health Officials Lash out at WHO, Defend Virus Search," Associated Press, 8 April 2023, https://apnews.com/article/china-who-tedros-covid-wuhan-e3b83ee921d68e2ffcb27b60d820f746.

2 These treaties not only provide for monitoring and implementation by international experts but also feature an expansive understanding of torture and mistreatment, including both physical and mental mistreatment, coercion to obtain a confession, and infliction not just of pain but also of suffering. For more information, please consult: "Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment," Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading.

3 Rana Siu Inboden, "China and Authoritarian Collaboration," *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 136 (2022): 505–517.

4 Samantha Hoffman, *Double-Edged Sword: China's Sharp Power Exploitation of Emerging Technologies*, National Endowment for Democracy, April 2021, www.ned.org/sharp-power-democratic-resilience-chinas-exploitation-of-emerging-technologies/. Among other efforts in this field, Beijing's China Standards 2035 plan aims to secure adoption of its national standards for emerging technologies by international standards-setting bodies.

5 For more information, please see: Alexander Cooley, "Countering Democratic Norms," (117-135) in *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy*, eds. Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Christopher Walker, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

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8 For more information, please consult: "List of Past Members of the Human Rights Council," UN Human Rights Council, www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/past-members.

9 Rana Siu Inboden, *Authoritarian States: Blocking Civil Society Participation in the United Nations*, Strauss Center for International Security and Law, February 2019, www.strausscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/strauss/18-19/RSInboden_AuthoritarianStates.pdf.

10 Rana Siu Inboden, *China and the International Human Rights Regime: 1982–2017* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 73. These states form a base of support that Beijing has relied on to secure adoption of several UNHRC resolutions that promote its regressive human rights views, its perceived national interests, and even Xi Jinping's political slogans. As Anne Applebaum described it, "Sovereignty is the word that dictators use when they want to push back against criticism, whether it comes from UN bodies, independent human-rights monitors, or even their own citizens." For more information on this topic, please see: Anne Applebaum, "How China Outsmarted the Trump Administration," *the Atlantic*, November 2020, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/11/trump-who-withdrawal-china/616475/.

11 "Chinese Mission Spokesperson Refutes Smears by Certain Special Procedure Mandate Holders," Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva, 10 June 2022, http://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/ryrbt/202206/t20220610_10701825.htm.

12 Inboden, "China and Authoritarian Collaboration."

13 For example, in 2018 the government of Belarus exploited the Universal Periodic Review process for China to state that Beijing should "continue to promote participation, integration and the sharing of development benefits by vulnerable groups." For more information, please see: "Draft Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, China," UN General Assembly, 26 December 2018, UN Doc. A/HRC/40/6. The statement cast China's existing policies in a positive light despite credible and extensive reporting about repression of ethnic minority populations, particularly Tibetans and Uyghurs. In turn, when Belarus was reviewed by the council in 2021, after gross human rights violations were committed following the 2020 election, China's representative stated that it "supported the achievements of Belarus in protecting human rights and its efforts to maintain its independence, sovereignty, security and development." For additional context about this topic, please consult: "Draft Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, Belarus," UN General Assembly, 4 January 2021, UN Doc. A/HRC/46/5.

14 Joey Shea, "UN Rights Body Fails Yemeni People, Again: Zero Accountability for War Crimes in Yemen at UN," Human Rights Watch, 18 October 2022, www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/18/un-rights-body-fails-yemeni-people-again.

15 The resolution on South Sudan endorsing a plan for monitoring through a commission of three experts was called to a vote due to opposition from a number of LMG countries, including Bolivia, China, Côte d'Ivoire, Cuba, Eritrea, Mauritania, Pakistan, Russia, Somalia, Sudan, and Venezuela. The alternate resolution, A/HRC/RES/49/35, was titled "Technical Assistance and Capacity-Building for South Sudan."

16 *China Diplomacy, Western Hypocrisy, and the UN Human Rights Commission*, Human Rights Watch, March 1997, www.hrw.org/legacy/summaries/s.china973.html.

17 Although UN General Assembly Resolution 60/251 says that the assembly "shall take into account the contribution of candidates to the promotion and protection of human rights and their voluntary pledges and commitments made thereto" and notes that "members elected to the Council shall uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, shall fully cooperate with the Council and be reviewed under the universal periodic review mechanism during their term of membership," in reality human rights standards for council membership have not been enforced, and the resolution's vague language is not supplemented with more specific criteria.

18 Beijing has increased its presence in secretariat positions on technical committees and subcommittees by 73 percent between 2011 and 2020. For more information on this development, please consult: "China in International Standards Setting," U.S.-China Business Council, February 2020, www.uschina.org/reports/china-international-standards-setting; and for more information about the Chinese government's broader push in other UN organs, please see: "Briefing Note: China and the UN Economic and Social Council," International Service for Human Rights, July 2021, https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/final_proofed_formatted_-_china_and_ecosoc_0.pdf.

19 In fact, while China has repeatedly been reelected, the vote margins have been shrinking. In addition, China, Eritrea, and Sudan are current council members, and numerous other dictatorships have held seats in the past. For more information, please see: Sophie Richardson, "China Grudgingly Gets UN Rights Body Seat," Human Rights Watch, 13 October 2020, www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/13/china-grudgingly-gets-un-rights-body-seat.

20 Peter Splinter, "Human Rights Council Elections: Clean Slates Continue to Undermine the Council," Universal Rights Group, 25 September 2018, www.universal-rights.org/blog/human-rights-council-elections-clean-slates-continue-to-undermine-the-council/.

21 For additional information, please see: "Membership: Committee against Torture," Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cat/membership.

22 "The Right to Privacy in the Digital Age," UN General Assembly, 26 September 2019, A/HRC/RES/42/15.

23 Jared Cohen and Richard Fontaine, "The Case for Microlateralism: With U.S. Support, Small States Can Ably Lead Global Efforts," *Foreign Affairs*, 29 April 2021, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-04-29/case-microlateralism. Given the tendency of African states to align their voting on thematic resolutions at the UNHRC, African nations will be an important regional group to win over if these thematic resolutions are to be successful. Potential candidates to join or lead thematic coalitions include Ghana, Mauritius, and Zambia. While the Africa group comprises only 25 percent of the council's seats, it often makes up 35 to 45 percent of the affirmative votes for thematic resolutions. For more information, please consult: *Between Principles and Pragmatism: How African States Vote at the UN Human Rights Council,* DefendDefenders, September 2022, 8, https://defenddefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/ReportDesign.pdf. Moreover, Latin America and the Caribbean form another key group, with potential coalition leaders including Costa Rica and Chile. Costa Rica, which has in the past played a prominent role in drafting international standards to combat torture, might be especially well positioned to build bridges with other states.

24 Ambassador Lisa Carty, "Remarks on Presenting the Draft Decision in ECOSOC on Bringing NGO Applications to a Vote in the EOCOSC Management Segment," U.S. Mission to the United Nations, 7 December 2022, https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-on-presenting-the-draft-decision-in-ecosoc-on-bringing-ngo-applications-to-a-vote-in-the-eocosc-management-segment/; and Edith M. Lederer, "After Years of Delay 6 Rights Groups Get UN Accreditation," Associated Press, 22 July 2022, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-united-states-social-issues-9377aa5124589c8a84bab1f81adbfc21.

25 "Cooperation with the United Nations, Its Representatives and Mechanisms in the Field of Human Rights," UN General Assembly, 9 October 2013, A/HRC/RES/24/24.

26 For more information, please see: *Permanent Missions to the United Nations in Geneva No. 120*, United Nations, (Geneva: United Nations, 2022), www.ungeneva.org/en/blue-book.

27 Democratic funding support would also counter Beijing's use of targeted funding for select special rapporteurs to elevate the prominence and capacity of those that align with its interests. For more information, please consult: Rana Siu Inboden, "China and the United Nations Special Procedures: Emerging Threats to the Human Rights System's 'Crown Jewels,'" manuscript submitted to the Special Issue project "Power Shifts and International Organisations: China at the United Nations." (Manuscript currently under review; publication forthcoming.)

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