

# DEMOCRACY IN A POST-COVID WORLD

MADELEINE ALBRIGHT

## **STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

SIPRI is an independent international institute dedicated to research into conflict, armaments, arms control and disarmament. Established in 1966, SIPRI provides data, analysis and recommendations, based on open sources, to policymakers, researchers, media and the interested public.

The Governing Board is not responsible for the views expressed in the publications of the Institute.

### **GOVERNING BOARD**

Ambassador Jan Eliasson, Chair (Sweden)

Ambassador Chan Heng Chee (Singapore)

Espen Barth Eide (Norway)

Jean-Marie Guéhenno (France)

Dr Radha Kumar (India)

Dr Patricia Lewis (Ireland/United Kingdom)

Dr Jessica Tuchman Mathews (United States)

Dr Feodor Voitolovsky (Russia)

### **DIRECTOR**

Dan Smith (United Kingdom)

© SIPRI 2021

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of SIPRI or as expressly permitted by law.

# Democracy in a Post-Covid World

SIPRI Annual Lecture No. 3

MADELEINE ALBRIGHT



**STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL  
PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE**



# Preface

On 24 May 2021 the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) hosted the third SIPRI Lecture. The lecture, which was held virtually, was delivered by HE Dr Madeleine Albright and focused on the theme of ‘Democracy in a Post-Covid World’.

Dr Albright is well known for her lifelong career of public service. From 1993 to 1997, Dr Albright served as the United States’ Permanent Representative to the United Nations and gained a reputation as a champion of international cooperation, the democratic process and the rule of law. From 1997 until 2001, she was US secretary of state. She was the first woman to hold that post and, at that time, was the highest-ranking woman in the history of the US Government. Since leaving government service, she has become a noted public scholar and lecturer. Her 2018 book, *Fascism: A Warning*, was an eloquent, timely and solidly grounded examination of a monster that, despite everything, has not been destroyed.

In her lecture, Dr Albright highlights ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftershocks have transformed the world. We are entering a new period. It will involve change and it may be painful. The pandemic has reminded us that global challenges need effective joint action. It is only through sustaining peace and democratic freedoms that the growing divisions between states can be bridged. Looking back at the period after the end of the cold war, Dr Albright sees opportunities to build democracy and enhance freedom that were not fully grasped. She argues that the onus is on the world’s established democracies to lead by example and put democratic values at the centre of any post-pandemic strategy to create a more secure, stable, healthy and prosperous global environment.

Dr Albright’s lecture was followed by a panel discussion involving a number of distinguished participants, including HE Stefan Löfven, Prime Minister of Sweden; HE Ann Linde, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden; HE Margot Wallström, former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden; and Ambassador Jan Eliasson, Chair of the SIPRI Governing Board.

On behalf of SIPRI, I would like to extend my gratitude to Dr Albright for her thought-provoking address. It was a memorable occasion and provided many useful insights and recommendations for the international community.

Dan Smith  
Director, SIPRI  
September 2021



# Democracy in a Post-Covid World

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Your majesty, Prime Minister Löfven, Foreign Minister Linde, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen joining us virtually: I am so pleased to be able to deliver the 2021 SIPRI lecture and want to thank my dear friend Ambassador Jan Eliasson for arranging this honour.

I also want to commend Ambassador Eliasson on his lifelong commitment to international cooperation and peace, a cause he continues to advance as the Chair of SIPRI's Governing Board.

I regret that I cannot travel to Stockholm to deliver this speech in person and be with so many of my good friends who I know are watching today.

I consider Sweden to be a country that has always met the very highest standard of global citizenship—in support of peace, in defence of law, on behalf of human development, in service to the environment, and in respect for human rights. We see the difference Sweden is making today through its chairpersonship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), its many contributions to the European Union (EU), its work to revitalize the United Nations, its engagement in the Arctic Council, and its efforts on behalf of women, peace, security and democracy. It is no accident that Sweden has given the world so many accomplished diplomats, many of whom I have worked with personally.

I am privileged to count both Jan Eliasson and Margot Wallström as members of a group of former foreign ministers which I founded in 2003. The group, which remains quite active, is officially known as the Aspen Ministers Forum. But its unofficial name is Madeleine and her exes.

The past year has been a testing one for Sweden, the United States and the world. But I think I speak for all of us in hoping that we are on a path to recovery and that we will soon return not simply to normality but to a renewed sense of optimism and justice worldwide.

In that spirit, the title of my speech today is 'Democracy in a Post-Covid World'.

## **Times of transition**

I would begin by observing that even though we are far from defeating this virus, we are already living in a world transformed by the pandemic and its aftershocks. Twice before in my lifetime, the world has experienced periods of transition similar to what we are seeing today.

The first, when I was a child, occurred after World War II when world leaders strove to establish regional and global mechanisms to spur development, prevent war, promote health, regulate trade, and prosecute crimes against humanity. The institutions they created helped us to resolve dangerous conflicts and make unprecedented gains in, among other missions, alleviating poverty, expanding literacy, and containing the ravages of communicable diseases.

The next transition got under way when the cold war ended and the Soviet Union disappeared.

During my years in government, a reinvigorated trans-Atlantic partnership came together to shape a new world. Our goal was to bring even more nations together based on core principles of democracy and free enterprise, human rights and the rule of law. To that end, we took bold strides towards the creation of a Europe whole and free, and forged partnerships with Russia and Ukraine.

We worked to strengthen our North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance by expanding partnerships, adding new members and accepting new and broader responsibilities.

In the Balkans, NATO and its partners were twice tested and twice successful, first ending the war in Bosnia, then acting to halt ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

Together, Europe and the USA developed a common agenda to strengthen the international system through the pursuit of Middle East peace, non-proliferation, debt relief and the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Working through the UN, we authorized scores of international peacekeeping missions to help to resolve conflicts that had become unfrozen in the aftermath of the cold war. We laid the groundwork for advances in international law through the Kyoto Protocol, the establishment of war crimes tribunals and negotiations to establish an International Criminal Court. And in Warsaw, in 2000, we convened the first-ever conference of the Community of Democracies.

### **International divisions**

When I left office 20 years ago, I was not naïve about the uncertain state of global affairs. But I was confident that the world would continue to move towards a stronger and more cooperative international system.

It now appears I may have been too upbeat. Because, in the short history of this century, we have seen a multiplication of international divisions and the rise of new threats to security and prosperity—from terrorism and cyberattacks to climate change and pandemics. The risk of conflict between the world's major powers has returned. The Middle East remains a viper's nest, with the horrific violence in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza only underscoring why many of us see no alternative to a two-state solution. And more than 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the historic rivalry between democracy and autocracy has been renewed.

The question I have been thinking about is: what went wrong? There are a variety of answers, but the most basic explanation I can give is that in recent decades, people have been assaulted by forces seemingly beyond their control. These forces include the impact of technology and globalization, the movement of immigrants and refugees, the rise of social media, and now the dislocation and suffering caused by the coronavirus and, increasingly, by climate change. Many people have no trouble adapting to these changes, but others are uneasy and yearn to go back in time, whether for economic reasons, or to preserve cultural identity, or to safeguard what they perceive as traditional values.



All this has fuelled the unwelcome rise of hyper-nationalism, which has in turn caused many heads of government to abandon the idea of global cooperation and instead insist on going it alone. They argue that interdependence is but an illusion, a theory cooked up by foreign policy think tanks to undermine national sovereignty and cause citizens to betray their own countries and identities. A former US president even declared that people everywhere must choose between globalism and patriotism.

The thesis is baloney but some politicians still find it appetizing—because there is no easier way to earn cheers from a crowd than to tell the angry what they want to hear. So rather than explain the world's complexities, they insist that everything is simple, and that greatness can be found by boasting about ourselves and ignoring the rights of others.

Many of these leaders pretend to be democrats, but they are really autocrats eager to stretch their time in power by rigging elections, weakening parliaments, smearing minority groups, trashing journalists, and inciting extremist backers to violence. They are so busy trying to silence opposition at home that they have little interest in joining with others to address wider problems. Instead, they do all they can to weaken multilateral institutions and to foster the idea that might makes right.

Whether their words are in Chinese, Russian, Arabic, Farsi, Hebrew, Hungarian, English, Spanish, Turkish, Urdu or Burmese the meaning is the same: the rule of law is for suckers; the world we want has no rules at all.

The consequences are both painful and plain. In many places, democracy is in decline, diplomacy is considered obsolete, and military spending is through the roof—as SIPRI has documented so methodically.

Slowly but surely, we have begun to lose faith in the ability of free people to make progress together.

This is not the first time such a cynical attitude has taken hold. It was also the case in the 1930s, the decade I was born. Back then, hyper-nationalism enjoyed its golden age as the League of Nations fell apart, Japan invaded Manchuria, Italy overran Ethiopia, and Germany annexed Austria, attacked Czechoslovakia, and joined the Soviet Union in carving up Poland. The ensuing slaughter continued until 1945, when World War II ended, and the horrors of the Holocaust were finally and fully exposed. We must not let that happen again.

Fortunately, there is an alternative. If there is a silver lining to the very dark cloud that the coronavirus pandemic has cast, it has reminded us that the interdependence of people is not a fiction. What happens to any of us can affect all of us. It has also revealed the folly of the authoritarian mindset, for it is not a coincidence that the pandemic started in a country where the government suppresses information and prevents its officials from speaking the truth.

### **Building bridges**

So with the lessons of the pandemic fresh on our minds, we need to return to the planet known as reality. We need to recognize that there is scarcely a peril

we face that cannot be eased through effective joint action involving the world's democracies and countries willing to partner with them.

To thrive in this new era, we will need to defend freedom and build bridges among nations. The question is how best to do that. Here I would stress three points.

### **Leading by example**

First, the USA and Europe must lead. Many countries can and do help, but no other group of nations has both the historic identification with liberty and the geographic reach to inspire and strengthen democratic institutions in every region. If the USA and the Europe are not out front, others will take our place: either despots who rule with an iron fist or extremists who acknowledge no rules at all. This would leave the world with a choice between repression and chaos; we owe our children a better alternative than that. That means we must defend essential freedoms and assist one another in delivering on the social contract.

We must honour our commitment to friends and partners in places such as Afghanistan, where the gains made by women and girls are under threat.

We must act together boldly to achieve a lasting victory over the pandemic and make new investments in global health, recognizing that so long as anyone is threatened by the virus, everyone is at risk.

We must work together to prevent environmental catastrophe, for mother nature is demanding a bolder approach to climate change.

And the USA and the EU must find a common approach to managing technology that will uphold democratic values.

We must manage the opening of new domains, from the Arctic Ocean to space and cyberspace, and new tools such as artificial intelligence and machine learning.

But right now there is a vacuum in global governance, and an open debate over who will fill it. China, because of its size, cannot be ignored, but its methods are cynical, its internal policies reprehensible, and the dishonesty of its early response to the coronavirus inexcusable. So it is essential that a reinvigorated partnership between the USA and Europe, adapted to this new era, step forward. And a series of summits next month, including gatherings of the Group of Seven (G7), NATO and the EU, provide a welcome opportunity for this agenda to take shape.

### **Choosing the right path**

My second point follows directly from the first. We must set the right example.

Throughout my life, I have attached supreme importance to the ability of the USA and Europe to work together to counter external threats and to strengthen democratic institutions and values. In recent years, our partnership across the ocean has encountered some turbulence for reasons I will not dwell on but which I think we all understand. The result has been to create doubt where there has always been trust and uncertainty instead of confidence.

Today, with a new administration in Washington, I am pleased to report that we have corrected our course and are once again headed in the right direction, particularly when it comes to relations between the USA and the EU. However, I know that doubts remain.

The USA's friends and enemies will not soon forget the spectacle of US democracy under siege from within on 6 January 2021. But what the past year has shown us is that democracy is resilient and so too is the USA. What is remarkable about our system of government, as with all democracies, is that it contains within itself the capacity, through open debate, to heal itself.

### **Sustaining democracy**

This brings me to my third point, which is that democratic nations must make building and sustaining democracy a first principle, not an afterthought, of their foreign and national security policy.

I mentioned that when I was secretary of state, I organized what we called the Community of Democracies, committed to the idea that democratic governments should assist each other in creating jobs, improving services, and countering threats. The time is right to revive that sense of solidarity, as US President Joe Biden has proposed to do with his Summit for Democracy.

The world's established democracies should help to strengthen liberty's cause through the employment of every available foreign policy tool, including bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, the carrots of trade and aid, as well as the sticks of sanctions and enforcement of the rule of law. Partnerships with advocacy groups and the private sector are also absolutely essential.

We must also apply the lessons we have already learned about the need for patience, inclusivity, a holistic approach, and remedies tailored to the individual circumstances of the countries involved.

The US National Democratic Institute, which I chair, is a rich source of wisdom on all of these points. We are now part of a global network of 'small-d' democrats, and have been honoured to work closely with the Swedish Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance in that effort.

Now, some will tell you that a democracy-centred foreign policy reflects a kind of starry-eyed idealism and that the only way a country can protect its interests is through hard-headed realism. Personally, I have always felt that this is a false dichotomy. I have said, mainly because I cannot make up my mind whether I am an idealistic realist or a realistic idealist. But foreign policy is a lot like a hot-air balloon—you need the helium of idealism to get it up, and you need the ballast of realism to give it direction.

When we consider the direction we want to go, we should recognize that free countries make better neighbours, more reliable friends, and the only partners one can consistently count on. That is why backing for democratic values must be the centrepiece of any strategy to create a more secure, stable, healthy and prosperous global environment—the kind of setting in which all people can thrive.

A little more than a century ago, a US president asked our armed forces to cross the ocean to make the world safe for democracy. Today, we must support democracy to make the world safe.

### **A connected world**

In saying this, I emphasize that defending freedom and building bridges among nations are duties not just for governments. As secretary of state, I turned for advice to scholars, businesspeople, labour leaders, and activists of every description. And I learned every day of the connections that exist between education and smart choices on the environment; between equal rights for women and the reduction of poverty; between socially responsible investments and the creation of jobs; and between support for democratic values and the building of sustainable peace.

Progress is the work of many hands. Which is why organizations such as SIPRI, with platforms such as the Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development, are so essential.

There is no limit to what we might be able to accomplish on a globe where cooperation and shared learning are present at all levels. But if we abandon that hopeful vision, we will see every issue through the lens of the demagogue—and live as prisoners of fear.

I am often asked whether I am an optimist or a pessimist. I reply that I am an optimist who worries a lot. I worry for all the obvious reasons, but I am an optimist because I believe firmly in the ability of humans to learn from history, and to create economic and political arrangements that work for the benefit of all countries.

Look no further than Europe, which today stands as a rebuttal to hundreds of years of human history, in which wars were fought over the symbols of national identity; in which national borders were constructed out of barbed wire and concrete walls; in which past grievances continually fuelled new conflicts; and in which citizens were taught to focus on how they differed from their neighbours and not on what they had in common. Europe has much to teach the world about the benefits of democracy, the lessons of history, the value of collective action and the costs of war.

The USA, too, has much to teach the world. Last year, it chose its president by a free and fair democratic vote—for the 59th time. The USA is a country composed of people who trace their heritage to almost every other country—but who are bound together by the values of liberty, by an unyielding sense of optimism about the future, and by the humility to recognize that we need friends and partners by our side.

I confess that I am not neutral on the question of whether the trans-Atlantic partnership is important. As an infant in my native Czechoslovakia, I experienced the turbulence of a Europe divided by fascism and crippled by appeasement. As a child in wartime England, I saw evil defeated by a mighty coalition that stretched across the ocean. As an adult during the cold war, I saw a powerful alliance bring prosperity to the West and join with dissidents to bring down the Berlin Wall.

As secretary of state, I saw NATO and its partners defeat ethnic cleansing in the Balkans.

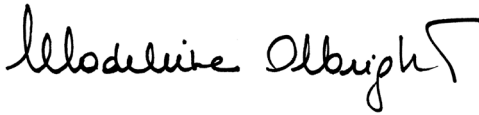
### **Stronger together**

Europe and the USA are not an ordinary team. Whether the challenge is fighting terror, guiding globalization along positive lines, or achieving scientific breakthroughs against the coronavirus there is nothing we cannot do together and very little that we can accomplish apart.

It is not a myth that binds the USA and Europe together, nor some piece of paper, nor decades of toasts and pretty words. The hoops of iron that link us go deeper than that to the fundamental values we share. A love of peace. A commitment to the rule of law. And support for the fundamental rights and dignity of every human being.

We may live on different sides of the ocean, but wherever freedom's values are on trial, Europe and the USA belong on the same side, the right side, thereby ensuring through our unity that liberty is the winning side as well.

Thank you again to SIPRI for giving me this opportunity and I look forward to the discussion.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Madeleine Albright". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Madeleine Albright





**Madeleine Albright** (United States) is a professor and diplomat who served as the 64th secretary of state of the USA from 1997 to 2001. In this role, Dr Albright reinforced the USA's alliances, advocated for democracy and human rights, and promoted US trade, business, labour and environmental standards. Between 1993 and 1997, Dr Albright served as the US Permanent Representative to the United Nations and was a member of the US Cabinet. From 1989 to 1992, she served as president of the US Center for National Policy. Previously, she was a member of US President Jimmy Carter's National Security Council.

Dr Albright founded the Aspen Ministers Forum in 2003 and is the current chair of the National Democratic Institute. She received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the USA's highest civilian honour, from President Barack Obama in 2012.