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Who is part of the Free World?

To speak to a truly global audience, Biden should leave behind the 20th century 'free world' definition and embrace freedom of many different kinds

In his 2022 State of the Union address, US President Joe Biden accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of seeking 'to shake the very foundations of the free world' with his invasion of Ukraine six days earlier. Putin believed that his 'premeditated and totally unprovoked' attack on Ukraine would be met with little resistance. But, Biden proclaimed, 'the free world is holding him accountable.'

When Biden delivers his next State of the Union address on February 7, he will most likely tout all the ways the 'free world' has continued to support Ukraine – and punish Putin – over the last year. NATO countries and their partners around the world have delivered massive amounts of weapons and other supplies to Ukrainian fighters while absorbing millions of Ukrainian refugees. Those same countries have upheld – and even ratcheted up – sanctions on Russia, while finding ways to support those scrambling to wean themselves off of Russian energy.

Biden's pride in his administration's response to Russia's aggression – a response that will soon include the delivery of M1 Abrams tanks to Ukraine – is justified. His determination to reinvigorate alliances and partnerships and cooperate closely on all major decisions is particularly impressive.

Who is part of the 'free world'?

But what exactly constitutes the 'free world,' and how clearly can it be delineated from the 'unfree' world? And is support for Ukraine in its fight against Russia a fair litmus test for determining who belongs in which category?

In one sense, Ukraine is undoubtedly on the frontier of the free world. Russia's actions there – torturing and killing soldiers and civilians; destroying homes, businesses and critical infrastructure; forcing people to

huddle in cold basements to escape bombardment – are blatant attacks on freedom. And its ultimate objective – the conquest of an independent country, absorption of its territory and nullification of its national identity – is the very negation of freedom. In fiercely resisting Russian forces, Ukrainians are defending their freedom.

But tyranny and conquest are not the only forms of unfreedom. In his 2021 memoir, Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen tells the story of a Muslim day labourer who was fatally attacked by a Hindu mob in 1944 on his way from a small job that he knew was dangerous but could not afford to pass up. Sen writes: 'the incident dominated my thoughts for a long time, and I came to recognise the huge reach of poverty in robbing a person of all freedoms – even the freedom not to take a highly probable risk of being murdered.'

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Building on this insight, Sen – with the help of the philosopher Martha Nussbaum – concluded that leaders and policymakers should pursue 'a view of development as an integrated process of expansion of substantive freedoms that connect with one another': political freedoms, economic resources, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security. All of these freedoms are both ends and means, as they enable human beings to expand their 'capabilities' to 'lead the kind of lives they value' – to live, learn, grow, work and exercise agency in the world.

By this measure, Sen points out in his book *Development as Freedom*, the developed democracies of the free world are home to millions of unfree people – people whose capabilities are stunted by everything from poverty and inadequate public goods to political and social marginalisation. Conversely, millions of people in countries that the US might deride as autocratic enjoy some economic freedoms, social opportunities and security.

Not a black-and-white concept

Recognising this reality does not mean accepting that there is a necessary trade-off between political freedom and economic growth, as Chinese and other autocratic leaders have often insisted. It does, however, complicate the distinction between the 'free' and 'unfree' worlds.

India – Sen's home country and the world's largest democracy – is a case

in point. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, India was classified as 'free' in Freedom House's annual country rankings and remained so through 2020. It is now classified as 'partly free,' in the face of officially sanctioned anti-Muslim bigotry and increased restrictions on civil rights and liberties. On the other hand, according to a United Nations Development Program report, India lifted 415 million people out of poverty between 2006 and 2021.

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India has refused to side with Russia or NATO in the Ukraine war. It has drawn steadily closer to the US, Japan and Australia through the increasingly formalised Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), but has also steadily increased its oil imports from Russia, which is now its top supplier. Retired US General David Petraeus recently recalled that he told Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, then serving as India's ambassador to the US, that as a member of the Quad, India must 'make a choice between East and West.' Jaishankar responded, 'General, we have chosen. And we have chosen India.'

In Jaishankar's view, the Ukraine war might enable more countries to choose themselves. He predicts that the conflict will transform a world order that is still 'deeply Western' – in which 'Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's' – into a world of 'multi-alignment,' where countries are free to pursue their 'preferences and interests'.

India is not alone. Countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America refused to vote to expel Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council last April. They blame Western sanctions as much as Russian aggression for the soaring food and energy prices that continue to cause them tremendous hardship. As they see it, it is yet another case of Europe and the US making their problems the world's problems.

If he wishes to speak to a truly global audience, Biden should consider leaving behind the twentieth-century definition of the 'free world' and embrace freedom of many different kinds. The US and its allies, he might say, are fighting to free the Ukrainian people and people everywhere from the shackles of conquest, domination, poverty, hunger, ignorance, prejudice and deprivation. We will seek allies where we can find them in all these fights.



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