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The Rise and Fall of “Democracies vs. Autocracies”: Europe, China and the Transmission of a US Strategic Narrative

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Abstract

Under the Biden administration the use of the “democracies vs. autocracies” (democracies/autocracies) binary for the designation of political systems was central in the US framing of the global order. This paper considers the democracies/autocracies binary division of political systems adopted by the Biden administration as an attempt to construct a strategic narrative. The paper builds on the literature of narrative in International Relations, treats the democracies/autocracies binary as a strategic narrative, and analyses its origin, transmission and apparent demise based on documentary data. The paper discusses the antecedents to the narrative in the US, its use by the Biden administration, its transmission to Europe, and the reaction to the narrative in China.

Introduction

The democracies vs. autocracies binary as strategic narrative

The Biden administration adopted the binary concepts of democracies and autocracies as the leading actors of its narrative of the international system. The use of the narrative was an attempt not just to describe the global political system, but also to give content to the administration’s foreign policy. The narrative of a global division between democracies and autocracies was more than an ideational construct, it had real policy implications as the US sought to create alliances with what were described as democratic states in a global contest with autocratic states. This paper analyses the strategic narrative of a world system of democracies and autocracies, the latter sometimes also described as dictatorships or authoritarian, even totalitarian, states, by reference to the antecedents to the adoption of the narratives by the Biden administration, the use of the narrative by the Biden administration, the degree to which it was adopted in Europe, and the reaction to the narrative in China.

Narratives are an essential constituent of international relations. Actors, whether individual or institutions, including states, use narratives to explain action by providing context and justification (Roberts 2006). Narratives describe not only the past and present, but also predict the future and justify policy. This paper makes use of the model of strategic narrative that has been applied to international relations. Among the leading proponents of this model, Miskimmon et al. define strategic narrative as: ‘a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors’ (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 2). In this model, a narrative’s strategic nature is assumed to derive from the intention to influence both domestic and foreign actors as an exercise in power to achieve policy goals that are an integral part of the narrative.

According to Miskimmon (Miskimmon et al. 2021) a single strategic narrative may include three elements: identity, policy and system narratives. Identity narratives describe the narrating actor, policy narratives set out the agendas that the actors adopt and system narratives define the economic or political systems in which the actors exist. The model is intended to demonstrate: ‘who is responsible for the formation of strategic narratives? How are strategic narratives projected? How are the narratives received – are they accepted or contested – what evidence can be provided to substantiate this?’ (Miskimmon et al. 2021: 9). The paper uses this framework to consider the democracies vs. autocracies (democracies/autocracies) binary narrative. For reasons of space, we confine our discussion to the system and identity narratives.

The Biden administration narrative of democracies/autocracies is rooted in national security policy, and has antecedents in the narratives of national security in the US and more widely the West. Arguably both Europe and China were targets of the narrative. China, which during preceding administrations had come to be seen as the greatest threat to US global hegemony, was the primary policy target on the autocratic side of the divide, while Europe was to be coopted on the democratic side. But the transmission of narratives is not only determined by the intent of the originator, but also by the environment in which it is received. The reception of the narrative may be determined by pre-existing templates (Freeman and Révész 2025) or by what Schmitt terms “local myths” (Schmitt 2018).

The binary of democracies vs. autocracies has a long academic history (Loewenstein 1935). Most authors of recent English-language works that thematise the binary accept it as a real division of the international system and present the two as opposing poles. Some of these focus attention on a perceived interstate competition (e.g. Kroenig 2020; Applebaum 2020; 2024; McFaul 2025), others present the space between the two as scalable or processual (e.g. Møller and Skaaning 2024; Levitsky and Way 2012). Stichweh and Ahlers (2021) find functional similarities in types of democratic and authoritarian regimes.

A narrative focus has been present whenever there is perceived competition between the two sides of the binary, i.e. a narrative contest between democracies or autocracies (e.g. Youngs and Panchulidze 2025). “Autocratic narratives” tend to be viewed as weapons directed at democratic societies (e.g. Dukalskis 2021; Sciorati 2025), and there are scholars who identify the very concept of narrative with negative influence, exemplified by Siegle writing for the US National Endowment for Democracy (Siegle 2024). Yet, few authors have written on the democracies vs. autocracies *binary* as narrative. A recent paper analysing the binary as an identity narrative is that of Retzmann (2025), and can be considered a “predecessor” of our research in this regard. Homolar’s work (2022) on hero–villain security narratives provides a wider context for the binary.

There is a largely separate but extensive academic discussion of democracy and autocracy as determinants of outcomes such as GDP growth and the propensity of states to enter into conflict with each other (Acemoglu and Robinson 2009; Hegre 2014; Mansfield et al. 2020; Sen et al. 2017). In this literature, the problem is not treated as a global, system question, but as a set of discrete variables that are ascribed to individual states. These analyses have, nevertheless, on occasion provided a justification of the binary strategic narrative and the policies that flow from it.

The paper is based on analysis of texts that embody the democracies/autocracies narrative. The primary sources for the discussion are official policy documents and statements, and also interventions from leading political figures including speeches and articles. The sources also include commentaries and analyses from academics, think tanks and media.

The US precedent: from a binary to a complex security narrative

The use of the democracies/autocracies narrative under the Biden administration was not an innovation, rather an old story with a new cover. After World War II (WWII), global system narratives of the role of the US were increasingly important in providing context for its foreign policy. Forged in the midst of WWII, the Atlantic Charter provided the narrative for the struggle between democracy and dictatorship. The post-WWII global narrative of the West was presaged by Churchill's Iron Curtain imagery in 1946 (Churchill 1946) and was given greater force as a narrative of a struggle between opposing forces laid out by President Truman in 1947 that became the Cold War (Truman 1947).

The apparent victory of the West signalled by the collapse of the Soviet bloc eliminated the grounds for the grand binary narratives of the Cold War. As the National Security Strategy (NSS) issued by the George HW Bush administration in its immediate aftermath stated, 'The bitter struggle that divided the world for over two generations has come to an end. …[i]ts core issue resolved' (The White House 1991). The end of the struggle was reiterated in subsequent US NSSs in the 1990s issued by the Clinton administration (The White House 1993) and even continued in the 21st century by the George W Bush administration (The White House 2002).

The system narrative of the Cold War was replaced by one in which the US faced new security threats that were no longer defined by a binary narrative, but were more 'complex, ambiguous and diffuse than ever before' (The White House 1993). The NSS of 1995 issued by the Clinton administration reiterated that the unitary threat had been replaced by 'a complex set of challenges' (The White House 1995), the specifics of which varied in the NSS of subsequent administrations.

In the early 21st century the George W Bush administration created a new binary narrative of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), in which, as the NSS of 2002 described it, the enemy was terrorism (The White House 2002). Despite its global reach, this was not raised to the level of a system narrative of a world divided as occurred in the Cold War. The GWOT narrative disappeared once again during the Obama administration, which returned to the view that the ideological struggles of the 20th century had been replaced by multiple threats of wars over religious, ethnic, and tribal identity, nuclear dangers, inequality and economic instability, damage to the environment, food insecurity, and dangers to public health (The White House 2010).

The old Cold War system narrative may have been redundant, but the US identity as a democracy remained central to its national security strategy. All post-Cold War NSSs have asserted the US democratic identity, notably through advocating policies of democracy promotion, but this was not incorporated into a strategic narrative with a clearly defined binary Other. As various NSSs showed, the end of the Cold War left the US narrative without a clearly identifiable ideological, political or geographic Other. Major states like China and Russia, that had once been the Other, became part of the complexity. For the George HW Bush administration China was banded together with remnant Communist states North Korea, Vietnam, Laos and Cuba, where the task was to encourage democratic reform (The White House 1991). But by the late 1990s China was treated as a singular case by the Clinton administration, in which the political system itself no longer defined the narrative and market globalisation was the overarching goal: 'A stable, open, prosperous People's Republic of China (PRC) that assumes its responsibilities for building a more peaceful world is clearly and profoundly in our interests' (The White House 1998).

The specificity of China was also recognised under George W Bush for whom, aside from the GWOT, the national security narrative identified a group of tyrannies in which China, and also Russia, was not included (The White House 2006). Even though by the time of the Obama administration the rise of China required a new national security narrative of the pivot to Asia, the China threat narrative was not incorporated into a binary global narrative of adversarial relations with a non-democratic Other.

Evolution of the US narrative under Trump 1.0 and Biden

The first Trump administration promised a rupture from the foreign policy of previous administrations, in effect a new narrative. The NSS published in 2017 projected a return to great power competition (Retzmann 2025). The strategy states that 'the policies of the past two decades – policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals … would turn them into benign actors … turned out to be false' (The White House 2017, p. 3), and that 'China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests' (p. 25). It also sees 'fundamentally political contests between those who favor repressive systems and those who favor free societies' (p. 25), and at other places 'authoritarian states' (p. 33) and 'authoritarian actors' (p. 40) are mentioned as security challenges. Yet, the document focuses on the individual main adversaries of the US rather than a system rivalry, i.e. the global division of the world into democracies vs. autocracies does not appear in the NSS. While different, in this respect the system and identity narratives of the first Trump administration were not a complete break from the immediate past.

By contrast, from the very start of the Biden administration US foreign policy reverted to an ideological division of the world into two distinct camps, democracies vs. autocracies, and premised a struggle between them. Biden articulated this narrative as a manifesto in *Foreign Affairs* at the very start of his presidential campaign by celebrating the victory of the past, but, departing from his predecessors, stated that the struggle had not ended: 'The triumph of democracy and liberalism over fascism and autocracy created the free world. But this contest does not just define our past. It will define

our future, as well' (Biden 2020). Less than a month into his presidency, in his speech to the Virtual Munich Security Conference, he repeated the vision that 'the future and direction of our world [is] at an inflection point' between democracy and autocracy (Biden 2021). Although it was only implied that US-led democracies are confronting powers like China and Russia, policy analysts did point out that 'the challenge stems from revisionist autocratic powers, particularly China and Russia' (Jain 2021). The first "Summit for Democracy", hosted (albeit virtually) by the United States in December 2021, excluded China and Russia from participation.

The Ukraine war was also framed as such a confrontation as early as 1 March 2022, i.e. five days after the Russian attack on Ukraine, in Biden's State of the Union Address: 'In the battle between democracy and autocracy, democracies are rising to the moment, and the world is clearly choosing the side of peace and security' (Biden 2022). Referring to this State of the Union Address by Biden, Sakwa notes: 'The ideological clash between communism and capitalism gave way to a broader but no less entrenched confrontation. Manichean binaries are fostered, represented as a battle between 'good' and 'evil'' (Sakwa 2025: 23). It was also projected that Ukraine as a democracy would (with the help of other democracies) win the war against Russia (e.g. Blinken 2023).

From among the 17 speeches of Biden as president that we analysed, 14 refer to democracy as being under attack and needing to be preserved, and 10 of these explicitly mention the democracies/autocracies binary as the underlying global division, employing a non-conciliatory stance towards the "other half" of the world. The "free world/liberal capitalism vs. communism" binary of the Cold War era, was replaced during the Biden presidency by a "Biden doctrine" (Colli 2024; Kim 2023) with its strategic purpose being not just to maintain US leadership, but rather to restore its failing global hegemony.

The narrative void of Trump 2.0

The second Trump presidency brought major changes to the global strategy of the US. The Biden doctrine disappeared, and early in Trump's second presidency there were indications that the democracies/autocracies narrative was no longer operational. The NSS issued by the second Trump administration abandoned the democracies/autocracies binary entirely, and made only criticism of elite-driven "anti-democratic" behaviour in Europe, the Anglosphere and among US allies (The White House 2025). In complete contrast with the Biden administration, and indeed with all post-Cold War administrations, the NSS stated, 'We seek good relations and peaceful commercial relations with the nations of the world without imposing on them democratic or other social change that differs widely from their traditions and histories' (Ibid., 9).

The EU response

The following discussion is based on interventions of leading political figures in the EU: the President of the Commission, President of the Council and the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy. Analysis of documents on the europa.eu website (European Commission, European Council and European External Action Service) show that the democracies/autocracies narrative did not exist in the EU prior to its adoption by the Biden administration. The binary was not formally adopted in EU policy documents on foreign relations or security policy, with one late exception, but nevertheless became central in EU narratives of the global system.

Europe divided by the Iron Curtain was the locus of both sides of the Cold War narrative, but the end of the Cold War dissolved the geographical, political and ideological binary narrative in Europe. From the 1990s onward the promotion of democracy and human rights figured strongly in EU external policy, but, as in the US, this was not directed at a structural Other defined by a binary global narrative. The relatively positive view of China in the 1990s changed to one that was more negative by 2010s, notably expressed in policy documents in 2016 and 2019 (European Commission 2016, 2019). Yet, even the EU's definition in 2019 of China as a partner, competitor and systemic rival did not consider the latter as defining a binary world.

The EU narrative of its identity in the world as a civil or normative power is cloaked with the language of democracy. Analysis of documents on the EU website shows that the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, in her time in office has made a total of 217 interventions that refer to democracy. The narrative has acquired an Other. Von der Leyen has made 11 interventions that refer to both democracy and autocracy, the first reference to autocracy occurring in December 2021, almost exactly coinciding with the Summit for Democracy organised by the Biden administration. She has also linked democracy with other terms such as authoritarian, 20 times, the first time also occurring in December 2021, or dictatorship, nine times, during her time in office. However, the clearest narrative of a binary world offered by von der Leyen has been formulated using democracies and autocracies as the opposing forces.

The adoption of the narrative can be traced in the interventions of von der Leyen during her first Commission. In her speech at the annual EU Ambassadors Conference in December 2021 she first took up the theme of the threat to democracy from the rise of autocracies (von der Leyen 2021). At the Munich Security Conference in February 2022 von der Leyen, focusing on Ukraine, stated that, '[t]hriving democracies are the autocrats' greatest fear', and expanded the theme from the Ukraine War to the global stage where Russia and China were attempting to rewrite the rule of the international system (von der Leyen 2022d).

In subsequent interventions, while Ukraine was often the starting point, von der Leyen expanded her narrative to a sharper division of a wider battle of 'whether democracy will be stronger or if it is autocracy that will dominate' (von der Leyen 2022b). The narrative of struggle between democracies and autocracies became increasingly explicit. In her State of the Union Address in the European Parliament in September 2022, again starting from the

Ukraine war, she stated: 'This is a war on our energy, a war on our economy, a war on our values and a war on our future. This is about autocracy against democracy' (von der Leyen 2022c). The speech expanded from the Ukraine war to a global struggle which involved not only Russia and Ukraine but also China against a core group of democracies (von der Leyen 2022c). The struggle extended across multiple domains including the digital sphere, critical infrastructure, dependencies and connectivity in which Russia and China were explicitly placed on the autocratic side of the struggle (von der Leyen 2022a). As the interventions by von der Leyen pointed out, and was emphasised in her speech at the Hudson Institute in Washington DC, echoing the words of Biden, the narrative brought Europe and the US together in a historic struggle where the identity of the two was unified in their fight for freedom and democracy, which continued from the historic victory of democracy over fascism and autocracy in World War II, and which would also define the future (von der Leyen 2023).

The theme of democracy appears at the centre of the EU external narrative, and has been repeatedly referred to by other leading figures. In September 2021, Josep Borrell, the High Representative for Security and Foreign Policy (HRFSP), also followed the US lead and adopted the narrative of a global struggle between democracies and autocracies: 'We cannot be an island of democracy in a world of autocracies... It is in our own interest that our system is shared by as many people and as many countries as possible' (Borrell 2021b). As was the case for von der Leyen, Borrell placed the struggle in the context of the Ukraine war (Borrell 2021a, 2021b, 2024b), which was at 'the frontline between democracy and authoritarian rule. Nothing less than that' (Borrell 2024a).

Not all senior EU figures have been equally committed to the narrative. Charles Michel, the President of the European Council during von der Leyen's first term, referred to the narrative, but less frequently and forcefully (only twice during his term in office). In one intervention he followed the narrative of the EU and US united as democracies 'to defend the rules-based international order from the attacks of autocratic regimes, whether from Russia, China or Iran' (Michel 2021). But in a speech given in 2023 he explicitly rejected the division of the world into 'the West against the rest, the North against the South, the US against China and democracies against autocracies' (Michel 2023).

The second Trump administration, as discussed above, has abandoned completely the narrative of democracies versus autocracies. This coincided almost exactly with the beginning of the second von der Leyen Commission. Despite the change in the US, the leaders of the EU persisted with the narrative and von der Leyen continued to refer to the narrative in her interventions (von der Leyen 2025). Kaja Kallas, the replacement of Borrell as the HRSFP, was if anything more forceful in advocating the narrative than her predecessor (Kallas 2025a; Kallas 2025b), for instance stating, 'The EU around the world must be the EU we want to see in the world: the antithesis to the autocratic axis forming today' (Kallas 2025a). Costa, the new Council President, has not explicitly used the narrative, although he has referred to democracy, with dictatorship as its opposite, frequently, while referring to specific dictatorships. The second von der Leyen Commission, using the term "authoritarian" states to describe Russia and China, incorporated the narrative in the Defence White Paper issued in 2025 (European Commission 2025), the only case where this has occurred in an EU policy document. However, while it seemed that the EU was willing to persist in adhering to the narrative despite the change in US administration, the narrative has disappeared from EU discourse, the last occasion it appears being a speech by von der Leyen in July 2025 (von der Leyen 2025).

The narrative in Germany and the UK

With the "Summits for Democracy" and several visits to Europe, Biden actively engaged his European allies as well as the "political West", i.e. liberal democracies globally. The democracies/autocracies binary became the strategic master narrative to ensure the alliance of Europe with the US, and unify the "West" in a broader sense. Among European countries the narrative was adopted particularly in Germany. Both the coalition agreement of the so-called "traffic light coalition" made up of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Alliance 90/The Greens (2021–2024) and the coalition agreement of the subsequent government made up of the centre-right Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) (2025 onwards) refer to the binary (Mehr Fortschritt 2021; Verantwortung 2025).

Among the German political leadership Chancellor Olaf Scholz referred to the binary in four out of 18 policy statements ("Regierungserklärung"), all four in 2022. The first occasion, his famous "watershed moment" ("Zeitenwende") speech of February 2022, employs the binary only indirectly, but he mobilizes the concept of democracy as a shared value 'to justify [his] announced policies and present them as without alternative' (Bisiada 2024, 643). Later in an article devoted to the period after the "watershed moment", he shared a straightforward vision: 'In order to defend these values against autocracy and authoritarianism, we need a new global cooperation between democracies – one that extends beyond the traditional West' (Scholz 2022). After two weeks in office Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock referred to a 'competition between authoritarian forces and liberal democracies' (Baerbock 2021), and also stressed the need for an 'approach to other [beyond Russia] autocratic, dictatorial regimes that call freedom and democracy and security into question, that break our international rules' at an event to launch the development of a National Security Strategy at the Federal Foreign Office (Baerbock 2022).

The German National Security Strategy, which was published in 2023, narrates democracy being under attack from the outside – it is this perceived environment that its new concept of "integrated security" is meant to address. The authors see a 'need to work throughout society to strengthen our competence in countering open and hidden attacks on our democratic values' (Robust 2023 p. 46). The strategy does not, however, adopt the democracies/autocracies binary in a clear-cut way, and has been criticised for failing to articulate 'the self-assertion of the liberal democratic order against autocratic powers, [which] is the essence of this watershed moment' (Speck 2024).

A month before the February 2025 elections Friedrich Merz, not yet chancellor, used very precise words in his Foreign Policy Statement: 'We are witnessing the dawn of a new era of systemic conflict between liberal democracies and antiliberal autocracies. … Russia and China are at the forefront of this era of systemic conflict. They are aggressively challenging the multilateral order' (Merz 2025a, 10:10). He repeated the narrative of 'a new systemic conflict … between liberal democracies and an axis of autocracies' at the Conference of the Heads of German Missions in Berlin later that year as chancellor (Merz 2025b). The ready adoption of the binary by the Merz government with a CDU/CSU majority serves as an indication that there has been agreement on it among all major parties in the German political centre.

There has also been unanimity between the two successive governments on the perception that democracy is under attack on the home front, and has to be actively protected – namely, that "enemies" of democracy are also within the German political system. This has been targeted first and foremost at the Alternative for Germany (AfD). The Scholz government was also closely aligned with the US Democrats in viewing Trump as a risk for democracy and openly supported Trump's opponent, Kamala Harris. The day after Trump won the elections Baerbock congratulated Trump on Instagram and stressed that 'in these times of systemic competition we need to work closer together as democracies' (Baerbock 2024) – hours before the whole Scholz government collapsed.

While the narrative of democracies vs. autocracies was widely adopted in Germany, the UK, not an EU member state, stands as contrast. Despite the close alignment of the UK and US on foreign policy and their "special relationship", the narrative has not been adopted by any recent UK government (under Prime Ministers Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, Rishi Sunack, Keir Starmer) immediately before, during or after the Biden administration. The UK narrative on China has shifted from one of positivity to one that is increasingly critical of China, and the UK has engaged in an extensive debate over whether China should be designated a national security threat. Nevertheless, while there are instances where the UK has followed US policy on China, there is no reference by any political leaders (Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary) in this period to the narrative nor in any key foreign or security policy documents issued by the UK government.

The Chinese response

In the early 2000s Chinese academics most often used the concept of "autocracy" (□□ weiquan) in historical contexts for systems like Francoist Spain or to describe Latin-American polities (e.g. Feng 2005). There is a similar concept, □□ quanwei, which in most cases refers to power obtained by a person or a group based on outstanding qualities or achievements ("authority"). It appears as a key term in Xiao Gongqin's theory which was developed in the 1990s to advocate stronger economic leadership for China's modernisation phase: neo-authoritism (□□□□□ xin quanweizhuyi). By contrast, the concept of□□ weiquan is negative without exception, and has been used as such in Chinese texts and speeches on the systemic polarity developed by the political West.

The application of the democracies/autocracies binary to China by Western academics did not go unnoticed in the upper echelons of the CPC, which initiated communication to party members on the sugject as early as 2013 (Wei 2013). During the first Trump administration, *Qiushi*, the official journal and website of the CPC dedicated to political theory, sporadically published papers, authored by political scientists, arguing against the democracies/autocracies divide (Han 2017). Yet, the discursive battle was really initiated by the two "democracies" conferences held in late 2021, i.e. towards the end of the first year of the Biden presidency: the US "Summit for Democracy" was held virtually (due to the pandemic) on 9–10 December 2021, the Chinese "International Forum on Democracy: The Shared Human Values" was also held virtually across a wider timespan between 4 and 15 December, 2021. The Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, protested against the US-organised summit saying '[we] resist Cold War thinking and uphold genuine democracy' arguing that 'the goal of the US is not democracy, but hegemony' (Wang 2021). The State Council Information Office of the PRC published a white paper in Chinese and English in the same month with the title *China: Democracy That Works*, clearly indicating the intention to engage in an "ownership battle" for "true" democracy between the US and China.

The reasoning that there are no universal rules on the implementation of democracy is a recurring argument in the work of Chinese social scientists. Zhao Chengfei claims 'we must integrate democracy with the specific national conditions of different countries, treating it as an effective means to enhance national governance capabilities. This also signifies that democracy is an open-ended, never-ending political exploration process' (Zhao 2024). The binary of democracies and autocracies is generally regarded as ineffectual or even harmful and bellicose, which creates pressure on countries in the Global South (e.g. ASEAN member states) 'to choose sides' (Zhu 2023, 34). A discursive battle is perceived as occurring, as 'the emergence of the Western democracies/autocracies binary narrative reveals how the West seeks to seize control of the democracy discourse through conceptual substitution, attempting to transform "democratization" into "Westernization"' (Sun 2023). Scholars also argue that the binary, which originated in the Cold War, has outlived its usefulness and needs to be transcended in this new period of 'differentiation and reconfiguration' (Jing 2021).

The democracies/autocracies binary was generally defined as a "narrative". The usage of the concept of narrative in China for the binary was highly pejorative, and implies that it was far from describing reality and was created by the US with 'the intent to resurrect Cold War-era divisions and stoke confrontation' (2021 nian 11 yue 2021), and 'exposes the dark soul and ulterior motives of certain individuals' (Le 2021). This idea of narrative as an instrument for the global strategic purposes of the US and for ensuring US "discursive hegemony" received support from academics (Zhao 2024).

Identification of the democracies/autocracies narrative as false continued all throughout the Biden era in official Chinese communication (e.g. Meiguo dui Hua 2022; Wang 2023). The White Paper published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2023 on the state of US democracy devotes a whole

section to the ‘false narrative of “democracy versus authoritarianism”’ (The State of Democracy 2023). *Xinhua*, the journal *Qiushi* and the *China's Diplomacy in the New Era* website (operated by the centrally administered China Institute of International Studies), have all been eloquent on the binary as “false narrative” (e.g. Ye 2024).

Although Xi Jinping himself has not spoken publicly about “narrative”, he has criticised “binary thinking” (□□□□□□ eryuan duili siwei) several times, including at diplomatic events (Xi Jinping huijian 2024). Xi occasionally refers to the democracy vs. autocracy or freedom vs. dictatorship binary (Xi 2023a), at other times the ‘Sino-Western struggle’ and even ‘old versus new’ (Xi 2023b). In opposition to the binaries, he stresses multipolarity, which is also the idea behind the four global initiatives promoted by China, the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) and the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) – especially the latter, which was initiated in 2025 (Xi 2025).

Liu and Liu in their analysis of the GGI blame “binary thinking” for ‘bringing to the international community not peace and cooperation, but exclusion, division and confrontation’ (Liu and Liu 2026) – an argument that has long been present in Chinese discourse. Apart from articulating an alternative narrative for the global order by rejecting the system and identity narratives of the binary, the four initiatives endow China with a leading role in that new order, while also avoiding direct confrontation. In this sense they serve as strategic counternarratives to the democracies vs. autocracies binary.

Conclusion

The Biden administration’s use of the democracies vs. autocracies binary for global ordering was not just an ideological return to a simple bipolar world of a New Cold War, but was also employed as a strategic system and identity narrative by the US to order the world and shape the policy of actors on both sides of the divide. In Germany and the EU leadership, the narrative became a part of official and unofficial policy framing, while in the UK the narrative was not adopted. Yet even in the EU and Germany, while it was adopted with some enthusiasm, it remained underdeveloped as a strategic narrative and guide to policy. Its most enthusiastic protagonists in Europe failed to define the system and identities involved in the narrative: what, for instance, constituted democracy or autocracy, and who were the democracies and autocracies. The locus of the democratic world was identified with the US and the EU, and included “like minded” states. But the only autocracies clearly identified were Russia and China, with Iran and North Korea being added occasionally.

Moreover, part of the strength of the Cold War narrative (“communism vs. capitalism”) was its acceptance by both sides, although the nature of the divide was defined differently by each side. In the case of the democracies/autocracies narrative, not only has the adoption been non-universal on the “democratic side” of the narrative, it was completely rejected in China on the “authoritarian side”. In addition, China has been offering counter-narratives of a multipolar global system that reject the binary and challenge the perceived “narrative hegemony” of the West.

The abandonment of the binary ordering by the second Trump administration, which destroyed the political and ideological system US allies were integrated into, was followed by its disappearance from the EU narrative. The democracies/autocracies binary had a contingent nature for the EU from the very start: as a strategic narrative projected by the Biden administration and designed to construct a single identity and a bloc around that identity, it collapsed in the moment the US no longer found it instrumental. In a broader sense, the rise and fall of the narrative also demonstrates that in the face of weak reception and complex realities, binaries as strategic narratives are hard to sustain.

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