**[Democracy Summit](https://www.dawn.com/news/1745822/democracy-summit)**

[Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry](https://www.dawn.com/authors/9600/aizaz-ahmad-chaudhry) Published April 4, 2023

The writer is a former foreign secretary and author of Diplomatic Footprints.

Listen to article

TOWARDS the end of March, the US hosted the second Democracy Summit. The stated objective was to put democracy and human rights at the heart of the Biden administration’s foreign policy. The first summit held in 2021 had focused on countering authoritarianism, fighting corruption, and promoting human rights, while the 2023 summit has discussed how democracy could deliver economic growth, inclusivity and media freedom. This US-led event focused on promoting freedom in the digital era, and countering the misuse of technologies.

There was, however, an aspect that was notably not discussed but was certainly a part of the equation. Not inviting China, and inviting instead Taiwan, for instance, was a signal that the US-China competition has assumed a strong ideological dimension. The US regards the Chinese government as an authoritarian regime that has joined hands with another autocratic government — that of Vladimir Putin in Russia. The summit appears to be a lobbying effort for the liberal democracy model that the West espouses. China’s governance experience has shown an alternative effective route to development, and is getting traction amongst the developing world. At a time when the world is on the cusp of a new Cold War, the Democracy Summit process is seeking to consolidate the voice of countries practising liberal democracy.

The agenda of the conference reveals another story. The co-host event chaired by the US makes a strong case for the ecosystem of emerging technologies to be underpinned by democratic principles and a fight against ‘digital authoritarianism’. The US, which has been a leader in high-tech innovations, appears to be feeling threatened by the pace of China’s technological advancement. Huawei faced export controls by the US Commerce Department over concerns that sensitive data could potentially reach China. In January 2021, American firms were barred from transacting with select Chinese apps. More recently, we saw the CEO of a China-based social media platform, TikTok, being questioned by a US Congress committee over concerns that the app could potentially share data with the Communist Party of China.

The summit declaration, which has 17 action points, has been endorsed by 73 countries. Among the prominent names absent from the list are Turkiye, Brazil, Malaysia, Indonesia and Egypt.

Pakistan’s reason for not taking part seems to have been the China factor.

Pakistan was invited to the summit, but it politely declined. The government clarified that our non-participation did not mean that we were against the concept of democracy, nor was it meant to be any signal to the US. The main rationale for Pakistan’s decision appears to be the China factor. Taiwan, which is an active participant of the summit process, is regarded by us as a part of China in line with the ‘One China’ policy that we follow.

There is a view that Pakistan should have participated in the summit, particularly at a time when we need the support of the US and its influence in the IMF to resolve our economic woes. The counter-argument, however, is that if Pakistan had participated, it would have been seen as distancing itself from China and joining a forum which is clearly espousing an anti-China pitch. Pakistan cannot afford to disrupt its relations with China, which has stood by Pakistan all these years.

In the evolving global politics, Pakistan has opted to follow a policy of not taking sides in the US competition with China and Russia. If there is an initiative that is aimed at the common prosperity of the world, Pak­is­tan should join it, regardless of whether it is led by the US, China or any other major po­­wer. Conversely, if an initiative appears to be part of one coalition or the other, Pakistan must exercise discretion. On three occasions in the past, Pak­istan had fully sided with one major power, and we suffered its long-term implications for decades. This time round, Pakistan seems determined not to take sides.

An argument is often made that a time will come when the US and China would expect Pakistan to choose a side. Pakistan, even under such circumstances, should maintain its relations with either power based on its national interests. If we remain steadfast in this approach, no nation can force us to choose sides. Robert Hathaway’s study The Leverage Paradox concluded that the ability of the US to exert its influence over a target country which receives American assistance, is directly proportional to the willingness of that country to be leveraged.

Let us stay firm in our conviction that Pakistan must maintain its strategic autonomy in choosing a foreign policy that pivots around its own national interests. Of course, that requires us to first put our house in order so that we can take our decisions in our own interest and are not pushed around.

*The writer is a former foreign secretary and author of Diplomatic Footprints.*

*Published in Dawn, April 4th, 2023*