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Democracies Under Stress:

*Recreating the Trilateral Commission to Revitalize Our
Democracies to Uphold the Rules-Based International Order*



THE TRILATERAL COMMISSION



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The global order that seemed so invincible at the end of the Cold War is now in doubt. Challenges to it come from within the very societies that honed and championed this order, as well from more traditional geopolitical opponents of it. Whether the world proves able to tackle the most urgent problems facing mankind today will in part depend on the ability of advanced democracies to overcome their current malaise and work together as they have in past decades.

A forty-five year old organization, the **Trilateral Commission** is recreating itself to be a leader and an indispensable resource in this effort. The Commission has unique advantages in galvanizing those in developed democracies to move from lamenting democratic decline to taking action to remedy it. It is the only organization with an explicit trilateral structure (North America, Europe, and Asia) and a legacy of catalyzing cooperation on global issues across the very geographies now suffering from democratic discontent. Rediscovering its roots, the Commission is sharpening its mission, rejuvenating its membership, and committing itself to a work program that will generate thought and action to strengthen the advanced democracies, enabling them to work together more effectively to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

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Recreating the Trilateral Commission to Revitalize Our Democracies to Uphold the Rules-Based International Order

THE CHALLENGE

The drive toward deeper integration and greater globalization seemed irreversible until just a few years ago. Yet in recent times, the unintended consequences of these trends—from inequality to cultural alienation—have fueled new forms of discontent, spurring a rise in populism and nationalism in the most advanced economies and democracies in the world. Today’s institutions—both global and domestic—seem ill-equipped to face these trends down and ensure the maintenance of the rules-based international order.

Although the headlines differ, there is a remarkable commonality in the stresses bearing down on the democracies of North America, Asia, and Europe. Social, economic, and technological pressures—be they rising inequality, shifting demographics, or the changing nature of work—are leading many to question whether democracy is still working for them. Social media is transforming and degrading politics by reinforcing bias, spreading falsehoods, and segmenting people into more insulated groups. Outsiders have capitalized on these developments to interfere in how these democracies function and meet the needs of their citizens. All this is occurring at a time when Beijing in particular is offering the

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world what many see as a viable alternative to democracy.

The fate of these advanced democracies has major consequences for the ability of the world to tackle pressing global problems in the security, economic, and political realms. These countries have the greatest capacity to address problems outside their own borders and in tandem with others. Prospects for maintaining the open global trading system, stemming nuclear proliferation, and adequately addressing climate change are slim as long as advanced democracies are compromised by internal divisions and governed by institutions that are no longer well-suited to the realities of the day. As developed democracies turn inward, the corresponding attrition of alliances, shared

interests, and joint capabilities across North America, Europe, and Asia paves the way for a more unstable and less prosperous world.

RIISING TO THE CHALLENGE

The democracies of North America, Europe, and Asia must be revitalized in order to ensure that they—not the authoritarian regimes gaining confidence and establishing themselves more firmly on the global stage—are the ones that offer workable solutions to the dilemmas of our rapidly changing world. This democratic renewal will require new voices and thinking from all segments of these societies. While there has been democratic

malaise in past decades, this historical juncture is unique. Unlike at other times, many of the governments of the advanced democracies—the original architects of the international system underpinning decades of relative peace and prosperity—are no longer the best safeguards of their own democratic workings, nor ardent advocates of the ability of democracies to tackle global ills collectively.

The Trilateral Commission is well-poised to play a vital role in this revitalization effort, and seeks to once again become an analytical home for assessing the stresses on the advanced democracies, offering solutions for dealing with them, and catalyzing cooperation among these countries on global economic, political, and security matters. While the democracy space has grown crowded in recent years, the Trilateral Commission has several distinctive advantages in this work.

- **Historical Legacy:** The Commission has a historical legacy upon which it can capitalize. In previous decades, the Trilateral Commission was critical in helping forge common positions among democracies and defending systems that were under attack. Founded in 1973, the Commission's original goal—to bring Japan into the umbrella of democratic societies when others would not—was controversial. But its purpose was also to buttress a beleaguered global trading order in the wake of President Nixon's withdrawal from the Gold Standard and the Bretton Woods Agreement. Following Vietnam,

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the Arab oil embargo, and the diminishing share of global GDP generated by the United States, doubts had surfaced about America's role in the world.

- **Trilateral Structure:** The trilateral structure of the Commission makes it uniquely well-suited to address the many challenges that are common to advanced democracies and to spur greater cooperation across them. The Commission has three groups: one for North America, one for Europe, and one for Asia (expanded from Japan to include South Korea, Singapore, India, Indonesia, Australia, China and others). It is the only organization to bring all the affected countries together in this trilateral structure, positioning it well to connect experts, institutions, and other entities to diagnose what is straining these democracies and to prescribe steps to shore them up. Moreover, the trilateral structure is essential to catalyze cooperation to meet pressing global problems—from nuclear proliferation to climate change to pandemics to growing protectionism.

- **Global Heft:** The Trilateral Commission has the global heft to take on a coordinating role (where existing efforts are stove piped) and to draw attention at the highest levels to key analyses and recommendations. In each group of the Commission, the membership includes senior people from business, government, academia, and the media—including former prime ministers and cabinet officials from around the world, top CEOs and chairmen, and the most recognized thought leaders.

A TRANSFORMING ORGANIZATION

In order to re-emerge as an intellectual and pragmatic leader in the effort to revitalize our democracies, the chairs and members of the Trilateral Commission—from all three regions—have recognized the need to make some substantial changes to the organization. New leadership in the North American pillar undertook an intense period of consultation across the organization and many changes have already been

instituted. The Commission will continue its 45 year tradition of bringing members together several times a year, both regionally and globally. However, consistent with its new, more focused mission, it has identified a number of contemporary themes—such as technology, populism, economic competitiveness, rule of law, and demographics—to which it will return regularly. The Commission is also identifying issues that can be advanced by its mix of policy and business leaders and do not necessarily require the adoption by national governments to have an impact. For instance, the Commission could focus on issues such as the role of the private sector in meeting global climate goals, the creation of codes of conduct for the use of the internet, or the reform of capitalism. The Commission is also working to bring in younger, more diverse members and to increase the transparency of the organization.

NEW INITIATIVES PROPOSED

In addition to steps already taken, the North American (Canada, Mexico, and the United States) portion of the Trilateral Commission in particular intends to undertake two categories of additional initiatives to help advanced democracies deal with new stresses so they are better positioned to cooperate in the interests of solving contemporary global challenges:

Initiatives to Address the Gaps between Elites and Other Citizens:

- **Domestic Dialogues.*** Strengthening our democracies requires building more “connective tissue” between traditional elites and other members of our own societies. Trilateral Commission domestic dialogues will bring together “coastal elites” and individuals from rural and other areas. The two-day dialogues, taking place in different locations in the heart of the North American continent, will each be organized around a concrete issue—such as urban renewal, manufacturing, or various aspects of the energy industry. This structure will allow participants to learn and to interact while giving them an opportunity to informally discuss what is straining our democracies, without the perception of one side lecturing to the other. The dialogues may focus on the younger generation of Commission members (the under-35 David Rockefeller Fellows) or be a hybrid of full members and fellows.
- **Heartland Fellows.*** In an effort to hear more views departing from elite consensus, the Commission will support and welcome a new set of fellows who will articulate and represent views from rural and other areas to help ensure this diversity becomes engrained in our deliberations. These fellows will be involved with the domestic dialogues and help the leadership to bring in new voices to speak at annual gatherings.

Initiatives to Create New Content and Original Analysis:

- **An annual trilateral report on one of the themes identified above.** The focus will be on issues that will benefit from a sharing of trilateral perspectives and/or present opportunities for trilateral cooperation. For instance, one report could both examine the challenges posed to democracies by technology and offer a trilateral proposal for norms, prescriptions, or institutions to help address them. The Commission will return to its roots and seek to produce content as seminal and lasting as Huntington, Crozier, and Watanuki’s 1975 Trilateral Commission publication, *Crisis of Democracy*. Each global meeting will devote a portion of the agenda to the discussion of this report and, with the agreement of members, a call for action.
- **New Trilateral Associates.*** In order to enhance both visibility and the quality of the material produced above, each pillar of the Trilateral Commission will identify an annual “Trilateral Associate.” These individuals will not be asked to leave their current positions, but are expected to devote a certain portion of their fellowship year to inquiry, discussion, and the production of the above report or a section of it. Fellows may be from policy, business, or academe/media. The North American, European, and Asian associates will coordinate and collaborate in order to ensure a trilateral perspective.

* Names may change, potentially reflecting sponsorship.

THEORY OF CHANGE

The Commission is remaking itself. It is building upon and expanding upon its decades-old traditions of addressing urgent international problems. It will now also focus on tending to the strains that compromise the abilities of today's advanced democracies to collectively tackle global dilemmas.

More specifically, the *anticipated outputs* are:

- A growing body of analysis exploring the common ways in which the democracies of North America, Europe, and Asia are under stress;
- Innovative proposals both to tackle these stresses and to catalyze trilateral cooperation to address global economic, security, and political challenges;
- Greater connective tissue between elites and non-elites in the United States and other societies experiencing an increase in populism;
- Reassurance of American allies about the depth of U.S. commitment to playing a leadership role in the world;
- The forging of personal relationships spanning countries, cultures, and sectors; and
- Reports on themes and issues that lend themselves to unique trilateral perspectives, which will include action-oriented recommendations.

And the expected impact is:

- A shift in the mindset of traditional elites from lamenting the decline of democracy to taking action to defend it;
- Greater resilience of the democratic alliance that has undergirded the international system for the last 70 years;
- Better domestic and foreign policy outcomes achieved by injecting new, innovative prescriptions into the national debate and governmental process;
- A growing consensus for global engagement encompassing elites and non-elites—which is a prerequisite for leadership in international politics and business;
- Potential diffusion of future misunderstandings across national boundaries due to a denser web of informal relationships;
- Greater understanding of future policy-makers of the challenges that will persist in the advanced democracies; and
- Inspiration and reassurance to those who have traditionally looked to the United States and its allies as democratic models by underscoring the continued commitment of its member states to democracy, the rule of law, and free and open markets.

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ENLISTING LIKE-MINDED ALLIES

The North American Trilateral Commission seeks to engage individuals with a passion and commitment to democracy, corporations viewing their economic success as dependent on the international system these democracies have championed, and foundations wishing to support organizations dedicated to maintaining the health of the advanced democracies and their global leadership. The Commission would be pleased and grateful to consider donations, corporate sponsorships, the endowment of particular programs, or other forms of support. It is looking to raise \$1.6 million a year for the next five years to support its activities.

For details regarding funding requests and budgets, please contact the North American Chair of the Trilateral Commission, **Meghan L. O'Sullivan:**
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THE TRILATERAL COMMISSION

Founded in 1973 by David Rockefeller and Zbigniew Brzezinski, **The Trilateral Commission** is a non-governmental, policy-oriented forum that brings together leaders in their individual capacities from the worlds of business, government, academia, press and media, as well as civil society.

The Commission offers a global platform for open dialogue, reaching out to those with different views and engaging with decision makers from around the world with the aim of finding solutions to the great geopolitical, economic, and social challenges of our time. Its members share a firm belief in the values of rule of law, democratic government, human rights, freedom of speech, and free enterprise that underpin human progress. Members are also committed to supporting a rules-based international system, closer cooperation across borders and respect for the diversity of approaches to policy issues.

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