

ISSUE BRIEF

Democracy under Siege: Advancing Cooperation and Common Values in the Indo-Pacific

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Democracy is a relatively recent transplant to most of Asia. Over the past three decades, it has put down roots in many unlikely places, from Mongolia to Indonesia. At a time when democracy is in global retreat, the majority of these Asian regimes have demonstrated surprising resiliency, though many continue to suffer from glaring flaws: weak state capacity and accountability institutions, the absence of impartial rule of law, and uneven protection of political rights and civil liberties.

Since at least the end of the Cold War, the international environment into which these young democracies have emerged has been a relatively benign one. However, the growing power of the People's Republic of China is making the task of democratic consolidation increasingly difficult in the countries of East and Southeast Asia, and it threatens to reshape a regional order that has until now fostered broadly shared prosperity, increasing economic interconnectivity, and political liberalization—and one that has also served US interests well.

This “China challenge” to the liberal order is different from that posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Rather than existing in separate economic spheres, the United States and China are now each other's largest trading partners, and China does not seek the eventual revolutionary overthrow of liberal democracy and market-based economies worldwide. Instead, the contemporary China challenge is more subtle: it seeks to place China more squarely at the center of economic relationships in Asia, the Pacific, and beyond, and to reshape the rules-based economic and security order in

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a way that benefits its own long-term national interests. But it also has political implications: in general, the countries best positioned to push back against rising Chinese influence are the best governed, the most prosperous, and the most democratic in the region, while those that suffer from democratic deficits are the most susceptible to Chinese pressure. Thus, the rise of China provides a compelling rationale to support democracy promotion—broadly defined here as seeking to enhance good governance, political accountability, and the rule of law.

This brief considers some of the traditional problems of democracy promotion in the Indo-Pacific region. It is focused on political practices in the core electorally contested regimes of Northeast and Southeast Asia (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Mongolia; Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar), though the argument here has similar implications for countries in South Asia and Oceania as well. It then evaluates the current patterns of democratic promotion initiatives in the region, and considers the prospects for enhanced collaboration between these states and the other major democratic powers of the Indo-Pacific—the United States, Australia, and India—to counter or reshape rising Chinese influence. The brief concludes with several recommendations for the United States and its like-minded allies and partners as they seek to buttress democratic political institutions in the region, among them:

- ◆ to expand regular collaboration beyond hard security issues to a broader array of economic and political ones;
- ◆ to emphasize good governance, political accountability, and the rule of law rather than the more provocative term “democracy promotion”; and
- ◆ to “think beyond states,” and seek new ways to empower non-state actors and enlist them in uphold-

ing a rules-based political and economic order in the Indo-Pacific.

1. The State of Democracy in Asia

Around the world, democracy is in retreat. Freedom House’s most recent annual Freedom in the World Report¹ measured an overall decline in freedom for the thirteenth consecutive year. In the past decade, many young “Third Wave” democracies have regressed under pressure from pervasive corruption, ineffective governance, illiberal candidates and parties, and the failure to establish effective rule of law. More alarming—and surprising—have been declines in freedom in established democracies, where populist parties and candidates have put new strains on old political institutions, weakening checks on elected officials and undermining nonpartisan state agencies and independent media.

Democracy in the Indo-Pacific has not been immune to these global trends. Regimes where democratic values and institutions appeared to be inexorably deepening a decade ago have instead slid backwards into illiberalism or outright dictatorship. One of the more shocking developments of the global democratic recession, for instance, has been the destruction of democracy in Thailand. By the early 2000s, Thailand appeared to be leaving behind its past history of monarchist and military intervention in politics, but a coup in 2006² restarted the previous oscillation between overt military and nominal civilian rule; its government is currently headed by a retired general who led another military coup in 2014.³

In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte’s prolonged and violent “drug war” is the best-known of an array of attacks on the rule of law there,⁴ including intimidation of journalists,⁵ arrests of two sitting senators,⁶ and removal of a supreme court justice who was a fierce critic of the president.⁷

1 *Democracy in Retreat: Freedom in the World 2019*, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019/democracy-in-retreat>.

2 Thitinan Pongsudhirak, “Thailand Since the Coup,” *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 4 (2008): 140-153.

3 Duncan McCargo, “Southeast Asia’s Troubling Elections: Democratic Demolition in Thailand,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 4 (2019): 119-133.

4 Dressel, Björn, and Cristina Regina Bonoan, “Southeast Asia’s Troubling Elections: Duterte Versus the Rule of Law,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 4 (2019): 134-148.

5 Alexandra Stevenson, “Maria Ressa, Journalist Critical of Duterte, is Arrested Again,” *New York Times*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/28/business/media/maria-ressa-arrested-philippines-rappler.html>;

6 Felipe Villamor, “Second Senator Who Defied Duterte is Arrested,” *New York Times*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/25/world/asia/philippines-antonio-trillanes-duterte.html>.

7 Felipe Villamor, “Chief Justice of Philippines Is Removed by Supreme Court,” *New York Times*, May 12, 2018, A4.

In Cambodia, the gradual deterioration of political rights and civil liberties⁸ has now reached its logical end point with the arrest or exile of the entire opposition leadership by long-time strongman Hun Sen,⁹ who has been prime minister since 1985.

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In Myanmar, the gradual liberalization of one of the world’s most isolated pariah states, a transition which began with such promise in 2010, appears now to have stalled: military influence in politics remains pervasive, corruption is endemic, civil liberties and minorities’ rights are still routinely violated, and long-running civil wars in several border regions continue.¹⁰

And in Singapore, the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) remains undefeated in elections, overseeing a model of efficient government, but also of electoral autocracy, with strict limits on freedoms of speech, assembly, and media, and an electoral system manipulated to systematically disadvantage opposition challengers.¹¹

Nevertheless, if we step back and examine the picture on a longer timescale, political trends in the electorally contested regimes of Northeast and Southeast Asia appear less dis-

couraging than in most other parts of the world. Democracy is a relatively new phenomenon here, with shallow roots and few historical antecedents; as recently as 1986, Japan was the only democracy in Asia east of India. But since then democratic norms and practices have spread far and wide. In Northeast Asia, young democracies in South Korea and Taiwan have matured, and both now have completed their third peaceful transition of power between different political camps; they score highly on protection of civil rights and political freedoms, and public opinion surveys in both countries show deepening attachments to core democratic values and ideals.¹² Democracy in Mongolia, which is sandwiched between two authoritarian behemoths, has proven remarkably resilient, with reasonably free and fair elections, competitive campaigns, broad respect for civil liberties, and regular rotations of power.¹³

In Southeast Asia, Indonesia’s transition to democracy in 1998 remains one of the great success stories of the “Third Wave” of democratization. Despite that country’s large size, astounding religious and ethnic diversity, and absence of almost any previous democratic experience, the post-Suharto regime there has moved haltingly toward consolidation.¹⁴ It has undergone two peaceful transfers of power, held regular, hotly contested presidential and parliamentary elections, and developed a critical media and vibrant civil society, though concerns about persistent illiberal tendencies remain.¹⁵ Nearby, Malaysia provided one of the most encouraging political developments in the world in 2018, when an opposition coalition finally defeated the ruling Barisan Nasional¹⁶ in parliamentary elections and ended more than six decades of unbroken rule by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). The defeat of UMNO, which dominated the Barisan National coalition, was quickly followed by the arrest of its leader and former

8 Stephanie Giry, “Autopsy of a Cambodian Election: How Hun Sen Rules,” *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 5, [September/October] (2015): 144, www.jstor.org/stable/24483746.

9 Human Rights Watch, “Cambodia: Wave of Opposition Arrests,” October 20, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/20/cambodia-wave-opposition-arrests#>; Charles Dunst, “In Cambodia, ‘Rule of Law’ Means Hun Sen Rules,” *Foreign Policy*, December 12, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/12/cambodia-hun-sen-law-democracy-china>.

10 Zoltan Baransky, “Where Myanmar Went Wrong: From Democratic Awakening to Ethnic Cleansing,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 3 (May/June 2018): 141, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/burma-myanmar/2018-04-16/where-myanmar-went-wrong>; Kristian Stokke and Soe Myint Aung, “Transition to Democracy or Hybrid Regime?: The Dynamics and Outcomes of Democratization in Myanmar,” *European Journal of Developmental Research* (2019).

11 Lee Morgenbesser, “The Autocratic Mandate: Elections, Legitimacy and Regime Stability in Singapore,” *The Pacific Review* 30, no. 2 (2017): 205-231; Netina Tan and Bernard Grofman, “Electoral Rules and Manufacturing Legislative Supermajority: Evidence from Singapore,” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 56, no. 3 (2018): 273-297.

12 Larry Diamond and Gi-wook Shin, eds., *New Challenges for Maturing Democracies in Korea and Taiwan*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

13 M. Steven Fish and Michael Seeberg, “The Secret Supports of Mongolian Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (2017): 129-143.

14 Donald L. Horowitz, *Constitutional Change and Democracy in Indonesia* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

15 Ben Bland, “Politics in Indonesia: Resilient Elections, Defective Democracy,” Lowy Institute, April 2019, <https://think-asia.org/handle/11540/10139>.

16 Sophie Lemièrre, “The Downfall of Malaysia’s Ruling Party,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (2018): 114-128.

prime minister, Najib Razak,¹⁷ in a massive corruption scandal, and the release of Anwar Ibrahim, a leading opposition figure,¹⁸ from prison—two critical steps toward creating a more accountable government in Malaysia. Another bright spot has been tiny Timor-Leste, which has defied the odds to remain democratic since winning independence from Indonesia in 2002. Its political system is no longer under the supervision of the United Nations (UN), its elections remain among the best-managed in the region, and its political party system is both institutionalized and competitive.¹⁹ It, too, has witnessed multiple peaceful transfers of power at the ballot box.

With the end of the Cold War, the international environment in which these young Asian democracies initially emerged became relatively benign. The traditional major powers in the region—the United States, Japan, Australia, and India—are all democracies and have welcomed political liberalization. In some cases, the possibility of improved relations with these powers has provided some needed motivation to leaders considering democratic reforms. In others, the prospect of reaping the benefits of globalization has driven positive changes to domestic laws and business practices, and helped encourage greater legal transparency and impartiality.

2. The Rise of China and the Challenges of Democratic Consolidation

Today, however, the growing power of China throughout the Indo-Pacific is changing this calculus. There is rising, if belated, awareness that Chinese power poses a fundamental threat to liberal democratic values, norms, and institutions in the region and beyond. China's own political system presents an alternative governance model, one that is unabashedly, unapologetically authoritarian, and whose leaders can point to the “miracle” of rapid economic growth

and dazzling developmental achievements over the past 40 years to defend this vision.²⁰ That model blurs the lines between state-owned and private firms, and between private and public interests. Its pervasive lack of political transparency, failure to adhere to impartial rules and standards, and unaccountability to the people it ostensibly serves is a feature, rather than a bug, of the system.

Moreover, China's growing economic clout threatens to reshape in an illiberal direction the rules and norms for doing business across the region, whether or not the Chinese model itself is attractive to the peoples of these countries. The scope of Chinese ambitions became apparent by 2013, when Chinese President Xi Jinping announced his signature One Belt One Road strategy (OBOR; later rebranded in English as the Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI).²¹ Though it was initially promoted as an economic initiative that would mobilize Chinese investment and expertise to build new infrastructure on China's periphery, the BRI has since evolved to be as much a branding and propaganda exercise as an international development program: it lumps together an exceptionally broad and vague collection of Chinese-led or invested economic projects throughout Asia, the Pacific, Europe, and Africa, and to date there has been as much exaggeration of its potential benefits (by China and its cheerleaders)²² and drawbacks (by its critics)²³ as of tangible achievements. However, what makes BRI-linked projects both most distinct and most threatening to the existing regional economic order is not the promise of new infrastructure, or strategic loans to underdeveloped countries that might not be able to repay them, but rather the near-ubiquitous role played by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and their subsidiaries. These firms frequently appear to be making business decisions based on long-term political or geostrategic interests rather than profit motives, entering into contracts for projects that offer no hope of being economically viable anytime soon, but that might eventually secure access to strategic assets for the Chinese state.

17 Hannah Beech and Austin Ramzy, “Ex-Leader Of Malaysia Is Arrested In Graft Case,” *New York Times*, July 4, 2018, A4.

18 Simon Denyer, “Malaysian Reformist Anwar Ibrahim Released from Prison, Granted Royal Pardon,” *Washington Post*, May 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/malaysian-reformist-anwar-ibrahim-released-from-prison-granted-royal-pardon/2018/05/16/8ac27b78-5917-11e8-9889-07bcc1327f4b_story.html.

19 Edward Aspinall et al., “Exchange: Timor-Leste Votes – Parties and Patronage,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 1 (2018): 153-167.

20 E.g. Suisheng Zhao, “The China Model: Can It Replace the Western Model of Modernization?,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19, no. 65 (2010): 419-436.

21 Christopher K. Johnson, “President Xi Jinping's ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative: A Practical Assessment of the Chinese Communist Party's Roadmap for China's Global Resurgence,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2016, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160328_Johnson_PresidentXiJinping_Web.pdf.

22 E.g. Astrid HM, Nordin and Mikael Weissmann, “Will Trump Make China Great Again? The Belt and Road Initiative and International Order,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2018): 231-249.

23 E.g. Mark Green, “China's Debt Diplomacy: How Belt and Road Threatens Countries' Ability to Achieve Self-Reliance,” *Foreign Policy*, April 25, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/25/chinas-debt-diplomacy>.

The most well-known example of this phenomenon is the Hambantota seaport and airport in Sri Lanka, which in 2015 ended up under the control of state-owned China Harbor Engineering Company under a 99-year lease after the Sri

“Chinese power poses a fundamental threat to liberal democratic values, norms, and institutions in the region and beyond.”

Lankan government defaulted on its loans.²⁴ This kind of economically irrational, but nationally strategic, behavior goes well beyond BRI-branded projects. In Taiwan, for instance, mainland Chinese firms have frequently purchased agricultural exports for transparently political reasons—often to try to increase support among politically important rural farmers for cross-Strait economic integration, and shift the island’s domestic political economy in a more China-friendly direction.²⁵ In the Philippines, Chinese firms have bought agricultural products on an ad hoc basis as a way to increase Chinese leverage over the Philippines in the South China Sea.²⁶ In South Korea, after the Korean government agreed to base the US-made Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system on its territory, Chinese companies refused to do business with the private South Korean conglomerate Lotte Corporation.²⁷ And in Japan, private manufacturing firms there were denied delivery of crucial rare-earth metals, over which Chinese

SOEs had a near-monopoly, after a flare-up of the territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands.²⁸

All of these are cases where Chinese firms have carried out the demands of the Chinese party-state system, even when it is damaging to their own bottom line and violates the terms of contracts and international business partnerships. The private (or barring that, at least functionally independent), profit-motivated multinational corporate firms that have long dominated much of the international trade of the Asia-Pacific have always operated at a disadvantage to domestic firms in the Chinese economy—a long-standing issue in US-China relations and a major point of contention in the current trade negotiations between the two. But now private firms are being challenged by, and operating at a systematic competitive disadvantage to, Chinese state-linked firms across an increasing number of foreign markets as well because they are typically playing by a set of rules (and accountable to shareholders) in a way that Chinese firms are not. The dominance of Chinese SOEs in BRI-linked construction projects, for instance, is no accident, and while it might in some cases reflect their greater efficiency and expertise in that industry, it is also because most of these projects are awarded through opaque and noncompetitive bidding processes. The expansion of this mode of contracting presents one of several fundamental challenges to what the United States and others have termed the economic “rules-based order” of the Indo-Pacific.

Growing Chinese influence also threatens to reshape democratic norms and practices in an illiberal direction in many other industries across the region—and beyond. In the film industry in the United States, for instance, the need to appease the heavy hand of Chinese censors in order to enter the Chinese market means that many blockbuster movies avoid any topics that are taboo to the Communist Party of China (CPC), or scenes that might portray China

24 Maria Abi-Habib, “In Hock to China, Sri Lanka Gave Up Territory,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2018, A1.

25 Shu Keng, Jean Yu-Chen Tseng, and Qiang Yu, “The Strengths of China’s Charm Offensive: Changes in the Political Landscape of a Southern Taiwan Town under Attack from Chinese Economic Power,” *The China Quarterly* 232 (2017): 956-981.

26 Roy Stephen C. Canivel, “18 Chinese Firms to Buy \$1.7bn Worth of Philippine Goods,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 16, 2017, <https://business.inquirer.net/226212/18-chinese-firms-buy-1-7b-worth-ph-goods>. This purchase followed closely on the first meeting in six years of the Philippines-China Joint Commission on Economic and Trade Cooperation (JCETC), which itself was held only after Duterte struck a more China-friendly position on the South China Sea claims than his predecessor had. See also Richard Heydarian, “Philippines Duterte Seeks Alliance with China But Defence Officials Warn of Strategic Threat,” *South China Morning Post*, March 26, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2082090/philippines-duterte-seeks-alliance-china-defence>.

27 Andy Zelleke and Brian Tilley, “In the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm: South Korea’s Lotte Group, China and the U.S. THAAD Missile Defense System (A),” Harvard Business School Case 318-022, December 2017. (Revised January 2019.)

28 Martin Fackler and Ian Johnson, “Japan Retreats in Test of Wills with the Chinese,” *New York Times*, September 25, 2010, A1. For a broader consideration of this episode and the “fleeting” geopolitical leverage enjoyed by the PRC via its rare-earths monopoly, see Eugene Gholz, “Rare Earth Elements and National Security,” Council on Foreign Relations, October 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/report/rare-earth-elements-and-national-security>.

and Chinese in a bad light.²⁹ In higher education, the massive increase in Chinese students in many countries—most prominently in Australia³⁰—has led to pervasive self-censorship on many campuses as Chinese students have tried to prevent discussion of topics such as the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, the status of Taiwan, and the crack-down on ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and university leaders have in some cases stopped events³¹ out of fear of Chinese boycotts, diplomatic protests, and the loss of tuition dollars and donations. In Taiwan itself, groups covertly linked to or corrupted by the CPC have ramped up activities aimed at undermining or silencing pro-independence voices, shifting media coverage in ways that emphasize Beijing’s preferred message and candidates, and corroding trust in democratic institutions and faith in their long-term future.³² These influence operations have so far failed to achieve most of their objectives in Taiwan—in the upcoming general elections in January 2020, the China-friendly camp appears likely to lose badly, as it did in 2016³³—but, in combination with China’s rapidly growing military power, they pose an existential threat to one of the most vibrant and resilient “Third Wave” democracies in the world today.

With the possible exception of Taiwan, though, expanding Chinese influence is more harmful in regimes with the weakest state capacity, the lowest standards of living, and the greatest need for infrastructure and development projects. When geopolitical interests are at stake, Chinese state-owned firms are often complicit in undermining, or further eroding, the power of anti-corruption agencies, watchdog organizations, and other accountability institutions to secure approval for new projects, especially when these are already weak, under-institutionalized, and easily bypassed or ignored by the countries’ own leaders. Prominent examples include the construction of casinos and hotels in

Sihanoukville, Cambodia;³⁴ the Myitsone Dam project in Myanmar;³⁵ and the East Coast Rail Link in Malaysia.³⁶ To leaders faced with stringent reporting requirements and assessments of economic viability from lenders like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), China offers an alluring alternative: to trade strategic benefits to Chinese actors in return for investment, and to line one’s pockets as a bonus. And if there are no other institutions capable of stopping them, the result may well be further entrenchment of corruption, kleptocracy, environmental damage, and weak state capacity.

“... as the historical legacies of the pre-democratic era are wildly different in each country, so are the problems in the current moment.”

Thus, growing Chinese power, and the extensive economic, political, and diplomatic influence in the Indo-Pacific that has come with it, has also created a new and compelling rationale for the United States and like-minded partners and allies to promote good governance, political accountability, and the rule of law in the region. Not only is better-quality democracy a “nice” thing to support, but it also increasingly helps to advance a fundamental common interest in limiting the spread of illiberal Chinese governance and busi-

29 Martha Bayles, “Hollywood’s Great Leap Backward on Free Expression,” *Atlantic*, September 15, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/09/hollywoods-great-leap-backward-free-expression/598045/>.

30 John Fitzgerald, “China in Xi’s ‘New Era’: Overstepping Down Under,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 59-67.

31 “China: Government Threats to Academic Freedom Abroad,” Human Rights Watch, March 21, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/21/china-government-threats-academic-freedom-abroad>. See also Anastasya Lloyd-Damnjanovic, “A Preliminary Study of PRC Political Influence and Interference Activities in American Higher Education,” Wilson Center, September 6, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/preliminary-study-prc-political-influence-and-interference-activities-american-higher>.

32 Gary Schmitt and Michael Mazza, “Blinding the Enemy: CCP Interference in Taiwan’s Democracy,” *Global Taiwan Institute*, October 2019, <http://globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/GTI-CCP-Interference-Taiwan-Democracy-Oct-2019-final.pdf>.

33 Kharis Templeman, “Taiwan’s January 2020 Elections: Prospects and Implications for China and the United States,” New Geopolitics of Asia Policy Paper Series, Brookings Institution, December 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/taiwans-january-2020-elections-prospects-and-implications-for-china-and-the-united-states/>

34 Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “‘No Cambodia Left’: How Chinese Money is Changing Sihanoukville,” *Guardian*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/jul/31/no-cambodia-left-chinese-money-changing-sihanoukville>; Muhammad Cohen, “Boom to Bust for Cambodia’s Chinese Casino Town,” *Asia Times*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/11/article/boom-to-bust-for-cambodias-chinese-casino-town>.

35 Tom Fawthrop, “Myanmar’s Myitsone Dam Dilemma,” *Diplomat*, March 11, 2019, <https://thedi diplomat.com/2019/03/myanmars-myitsone-dam-dilemma/>.

36 Tashny Sukumaran, “Future of Malaysia’s China-Backed East Coast Rail Link Hinges on Elusive Report,” *South China Morning Post*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/2180576/future-massive-china-backed-malaysian-rail-link-hinges>.

ness practices. More and more, cross-national efforts to bolster democratic institutions will stand in stark contrast to Chinese policies and actions in the region. And the gains to be had from cooperation among the major democratic powers on advancement of these goals will increasingly have strategic implications for the burgeoning US-China rivalry as well.

3. Challenges of Joint Democracy Promotion Efforts in the Indo-Pacific

If cross-national collaboration on “democracy promotion,” broadly defined, would have strategic benefits for the democracies in the region, why has it not already happened? There are at least three reasons. The first is simply that Asia’s exceptional historical, political, and economic diversity is a major obstacle to cooperation.

In most other regions of the world, one can identify a modal pattern of democratization and historical legacies that most countries share. The regimes of Eastern Europe, for instance, had a common experience behind the Iron Curtain of foreign dominance by the Soviet Union, communist governments, and planned economies, and they had to undertake daunting dual transitions toward liberal democracy and a market-based economy. In Latin America, the legacies of military dictatorships, leftist rebellions, and enormous economic inequality are unifying concerns in the struggle to consolidate democracy there. In Sub-Saharan Africa, two-thirds of all regimes transitioned at the end of the Cold War from single-party autocracies to multiparty regimes with contested elections. Democratic consolidation in most of those cases has been hindered first and foremost by weak state capacity and rule of law, and international organizations have had an outsized role across the continent in trying to bolster state institutions.

In Asia, by contrast, there is no predominant pattern. One can find examples of all these different paths to democracy, as well as regimes that still have not even adopted the façade of multiparty elections, such as Vietnam, Laos, Brunei, North Korea, and, of course, China. Mongolia, for instance, has a post-communist regime with a combination of democratic strengths and weaknesses most similar to post-Soviet republics in Central Asia and Eastern Europe.

Cambodia’s challenges of post-conflict reconstruction under the tutelage of UN agencies fit a pattern more common in Sub-Saharan Africa. The quality of democracy in the Philippines looks a lot like the modal Latin American case, with enormous economic inequality, weak state capacity and autonomy from society, and the political dominance of local caudillos all persisting as serious obstacles to consolidation. In Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia, by contrast, state capacity is relatively high, and the fundamental barrier to democratization has been dominant parties that are too strong, rather than too weak.

This diversity of cases points to a second obstacle to cross-national cooperation to bolster democratic institutions: as the historical legacies of the pre-democratic era are wildly different in each country, so are the problems in the current moment. Like Leo Tolstoy’s unhappy families in *Anna Karenina*, each flawed democracy in the region remains flawed in its own unique way. For example, supporting competitive elections in the Philippines is not among the biggest problems facing democracy there; strengthening state capacity, political parties, and the rule of law are. But in Singapore, it is the opposite: the state has fearsome governing capacity, but the ruling PAP also dominates the political system, opposition parties are boxed in with clever manipulation of electoral laws, most media is under state control, and civil society groups are strictly regulated. Thus, one-size-fits-all solutions applied to address democratic shortcomings across the Indo-Pacific will not get very far.

Nor is there even a consensus within the region about what “democracy” is, or what core set of institutional prerequisites is necessary for political legitimacy. The debate in Asia over what constitutes legitimate government goes back at least to the famous 1990s’ “Asian Values” controversy,³⁷ when both Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohamad argued that Asians needed economic growth more than civil liberties, and that society’s interests should trump individual rights. While the forceful advocacy for an “Asian” political model that was superior to the West’s version of liberal democracy died down after the Asian financial crisis in 1997, “democracy promotion”—especially advocacy for the protection of civil liberties, independent courts, and freedoms of assembly and the press—remains a prickly subject in many countries in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, the “Asian Values” arguments are strikingly similar to the kinds of arguments that apologists

37 Mark R. Thompson, “Dead Idea (Still) Walking: The Legacy of the ‘Asian Democracy’ and ‘Asian Values’ Debate,” *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization*, (Routledge, 2015): 36-49; Donald K. Emmerson, “Singapore and the ‘Asian Values’ Debate,” *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 4 (1995): 95–105.

for the Chinese regime now make against “Western”-style, competitive, multiparty democracy. Thus, to the extent that this worldview still has adherents in Singapore, Malaysia, and elsewhere, its persistence greatly complicates the development of a normative consensus in the region behind a liberal democratic alternative to the Chinese political-economic model.

“... a multilateral project to use democratic promotion as a long-term hedge against Chinese power has the most promise.”

The third obstacle to coordinated democracy promotion is the regional security architecture. Thirty years after the end of the Cold War, it still resembles a hub-and-spoke pattern, with the United States as the patron state in a collection of asymmetric alliances and partnerships, rather than a regional organization with shared interests and burdens for providing for collective security. In Europe, economic integration has been complemented by NATO’s security architecture and the lengthening reach and capacity of supranational institutions of the European Union (EU). In the Indo-Pacific, by contrast, economic ties are increasingly disconnected from political and security ones: China has replaced the United States and Japan as the leading trading partner of most of the countries in the region, and US-China trade has burgeoned as well, even as the two countries have entered a period of heightened competition for influence.

As a consequence, the countries whose political and economic systems now are most similar still maintain only weakly institutionalized security relationships with one another across most domains, if they cooperate at all. Japan

and South Korea, for instance, share an obvious common security concern: the threat from North Korea. But even something as fundamental and high-stakes as intelligence sharing on North Korea’s missile program can be, and has recently been, threatened with disruption due to domestic political pressures.³⁸ Taiwan, too, would have much to gain from more institutionalized security cooperation with Japan and South Korea, but remains formally isolated because of Chinese pressure on the latter two—and also because the United States has strictly circumscribed its partnership with Taiwan in order to maintain a working relationship with China.

The obstacles to cooperation are even greater in Southeast Asia, where the norms of mutual noninterference in domestic affairs and nonalignment in security arrangements run especially deep. The development of ASEAN into a regional organization capable of standing up to Chinese pressure on, for example, the South China Sea, has been systematically hindered by the deep political divides between its 10 member countries, and the enduring reluctance of its most powerful states to advance a shared program of political reforms that might be opposed by some of its other members.

For its part, the United States maintains separate treaty alliances with Singapore and the Philippines, and has a long history of military-to-military cooperation with Thailand and Indonesia—but each of these is a bilateral spoke on the security wheel, rather than part of a multilateral front. Further afield, the US security partnership with Australia and New Zealand forms yet another stand-alone arrangement and, uniquely for the Indo-Pacific, both are part of the anglophone Five Eyes signals intelligence partnership. This security relationship has traditionally existed at arm’s length from the various other US commitments in the Pacific, though in practice Australia has joined US-led coalitions in military action from Korea to Vietnam and even to Afghanistan. In the other direction, US security cooperation with India remains relatively thin, though with some significant advances over the past decade.³⁹ Here the baggage of history remains a considerable obstacle to cooperation in non-security areas as well—India’s traditional position as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) during the Cold War, and US sanctions imposed in response to nuclear tests in 1998, among other factors, have inhibited the

38 Min Joo Kim and Simon Denyer, “Under U.S. Pressure, South Korea Holds Off Ending Intelligence Pact with Japan,” *Washington Post*, November 22, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/under-us-pressure-south-korea-holds-off-ending-intelligence-pact-with-japan/2019/11/22/14aadaf0-0d09-11ea-8054-289aef6e38a3_story.html.

39 Kathleen H. Hicks et al., “U.S.-India Security Cooperation: Progress and Promise for the Next Administration,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2016, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/161003_Hicks_USIndiaSecurity_Web.pdf; Zach Montague, “U.S.-India Defense Ties Grow Closer as Concerns in Asia Loom,” *New York Times*, November 21, 2019, A5.

deepening of cooperation on political and economic issues until fairly recently.

The fundamental consequence of this cross-national diversity in political, economic, and security arrangements is that there is little preexisting sense of a shared political community in the region to build on, or much of a common understanding of what “promoting democracy” should even be about. The historical obstacles to cooperation are too great, and the political and developmental needs too different, for coordination on a standardized package of reforms or activities to be practical. For instance, one does not need to emphasize state-building in Singapore, but in Timor-Leste it needs to be a central part of any reform program. It is true that there are some common challenges shared by several of the “flawed” democracies in the region: Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, and the Philippines, for example, all could benefit from efforts to strengthen the rule of law and judicial independence, build up professional and independent accountability institutions, and prevent electoral manipulation and malpractice. But in, say, Taiwan and South Korea, these are much less urgent concerns. Moreover, a state-led, multilateral effort in the region to shore up crucial elements of liberal democracy—for instance, political parties or anti-corruption bodies—will probably run into pushback from precisely those regimes that most need it. A multilateral, state-led political reform agenda then is likely to be limited to what all participants can agree on—which may not be much at all.

Thus, the immense variation in political conditions across the region implies that a multilateral project to use democratic promotion as a long-term hedge against Chinese power has the most promise if it is diverse, multifaceted, and undertaken by a variety of political actors with widely different resources and competencies. Given the historical sensitivity toward US conceptions of democracy, and the negative reputation that US-led democracy promotion efforts acquired in the region in the wake of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, coordination at the state-to-state level may also need to drop the pretense of being about promoting “democracy” at all, and instead emphasize individual components such as good governance, political accountability, and the rule of law.

4. The Current State of Democracy Promotion in the Indo-Pacific

What is the state of cooperation on common political challenges among the democracies in the Indo-Pacific today? And how might a more robust democracy promotion agenda, broadly defined, best serve US interests across this huge region?

First, the number and variety of bilateral and multilateral programs in the region that can be fairly included under the label of “democracy promotion” activities is surprisingly large. As the long-standing dominant power in the Pacific, and the major advocate for democratic government and market economies, the United States still supports the greatest number and diversity of initiatives, as the State Department’s November 2019 report on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative makes clear.⁴⁰ But US (and European) programming has been joined by an increasing number of initiatives from other major and middle regional powers over the past 20 years to advance political and developmental goals in the Indo-Pacific.

Japan, for instance, has long provided aid for economic development through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and plays a lead role in the ADB. It has traditionally steered clear of more politically sensitive programs in favor of “technical” assistance. But this pattern has changed somewhat over the past 15 years.⁴¹ In 2006, for instance, Taro Aso, foreign minister in the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan-led government, announced the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity program⁴², which was intended to be a more robust and explicit effort both to support democracy abroad and deepen security partnerships with fellow democracies, including India and Australia. The legacy of that program lives on in the renewed conversations about “The Quad”—a security partnership of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India implicitly aimed at counterbalancing China’s growing hard power. The share of Japanese developmental assistance directed toward promoting good governance and state capacity-building has also increased. Following in Japan’s footsteps, South Korea’s developmental assistance programs have also risen to become a significant source of aid in the region, though the

40 US State Department, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>.

41 Maiko Ichihara, “International Power Structure and Strategic Motivations: Democracy Support from Japan and Indonesia,” JICA-RI Working Paper No. 194, JICA Research Institute, August 2019.

42 Yuichi Hosoya, “The Rise and Fall of Japan’s Grand Strategy: The ‘Arc of Freedom and Prosperity’ and the Future Asian Order,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 18, no. 1 (2011): 13-24

Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) has so far avoided supporting overt political reforms in favor of softer technical and capacity-building ones.⁴³

Taiwan has also developed a significant array of foreign aid and cooperation initiatives. Perhaps because of its diplomatic isolation, it has been a leader in people-to-people exchanges and support for the activities of regional non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Several major international NGOs, including Reporters Without Borders and Amnesty International, have established regional offices in Taiwan. The Taiwanese foreign ministry also recently hosted the Oslo Freedom Forum⁴⁴ and its own Yushan Forum,⁴⁵ a gathering of representatives from other democratic countries in Asia, to discuss public-private partnerships that might aid regional development. Taiwan was also the first country in Asia to establish a foundation dedicated explicitly to democracy promotion, the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD).⁴⁶ Taking its inspiration from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in the United States, the TFD has included a significant academic and research component to its activities, publishing a well-regarded, peer-reviewed English-language journal (the *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*) and funding fellowships for both Taiwanese and foreign students to do research on democracy in Asia. It has also supported educational activities such as the Asian Young Leaders for Democracy (AYLD) program, which brings young people from other parts of Asia to Taiwan for coursework about and training in democracy promotion. In the past four years, Taiwan has also redoubled its efforts to increase investment in, humanitarian and technical aid to, and educational exchanges with the ASEAN states under current President Tsai Ing-wen's New Southbound Policy.⁴⁷ Uniquely among the Indo-Pacific states, this initiative was explicitly intended to lessen Taiwan's economic dependence on China and strengthen its own soft power in the region.

More surprising still is the emergence of Indonesia as a proactive player in the democracy promotion game. During the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono from 2004 to 2014, Indonesia played a key role in adding text about the protection of democracy and human rights to the preamble of the ASEAN Charter. In 2008, it launched the Bali Democracy Forum (BDF), intended to be a venue for representatives from the region's governments to discuss common governance challenges and to exchange advice. In addition, Indonesia's South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) program, relaunched in 2010, has included democracy promotion, law enforcement training, and peacekeeping exercises as part of its regional activities.⁴⁸

In contrast, India has been frequently characterized as a "reluctant" democracy promoter.⁴⁹ Its foreign policy elite have long held concerns that initiatives to support democracy abroad would in practice lead to violations of state sovereignty and the principles of noninterference and nonintervention. Most of India's modest foreign aid efforts have, as a consequence, been channeled through UN-affiliated organizations. Nevertheless, over the past two decades, India has taken some tentative steps to support democratic principles and liberal political reforms. It joined the Global Democracy Initiative at the UN in 2005,⁵⁰ and between 2006 and 2013 it contributed more than US\$30 million to the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF); these funds went primarily to projects in neighboring countries in South Asia, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.⁵¹ But potentially more geopolitically consequential are India's recent steps to cooperate with partners in efforts stretching beyond South Asia. In 2016, for instance, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced during a visit to India a proposed "Freedom Corridor" to promote economic connectivity between Asia and Africa.⁵² Later rebranded the

43 Ichihara, "International Power Structure," 4-5.

44 Chris Horton, "Taiwan, Isolated by China, Will Host Human Rights Event," *New York Times* August 2, 2018, A4.

45 Alan H. Yang and Ding-Liang Chen, "The Yushan Forum and Taiwan's Warm Power," Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 18, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/10/the-yushan-forum-and-taiwans-warm-power/>.

46 "Introduction," Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, <http://www.tfd.org.tw/opencms/english/grants/introduction.html>.

47 Jing Bo-jiun, "Taiwan's Regional Strategy in Southeast Asia: Kicking the New Southbound Policy into High Gear," National Bureau of Asian Research, January 2018, https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/56534154/Jing_Bo-jiun_NBR_brief_on_NSP_013018.pdf

48 Ichihara, "International Power Structure," 11.

49 Pratap Bhanu Mehta, "Do New Democracies Support Democracy? Reluctant India," *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 4 (2011): 97-109; Ian Hall, "Not Promoting, Not Exporting: India's Democracy Assistance," Observer Research Foundation Occasional Paper Series, December 2017, 1.

50 Hall, "Do New Democracies Support Democracy?" 8.

51 Hall, "Do New Democracies Support Democracy?" 8, 12-13.

52 Jagannath Panda, "The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor: An India-Japan Arch in the Making?" *Focus Asia*, no. 21 (August 2017), <http://isdpeu/content/uploads/2017/08/2017-focus-asia-jagannath-panda.pdf>.

“Asia-Africa Growth Corridor” and intended to serve as a “liberal and values-based” alternative to China’s BRI, this initiative is the most ambitious aspect of a deepening India-Japan relationship that now includes discussion of a wide range of foreign policy and security issues, and an annual meeting between the countries’ prime ministers.⁵³ The concurrent quickening pace and depth of India’s diplomatic exchanges with Japan, Australia, and the United States is one of the most visible signs of strategic convergence within the region in the face of China’s rise, and it raises the tantalizing possibility that a broader, multilateral state-led effort to promote democracy might be feasible.

“As always, the hardest question to answer about aid for democracy promotion and development is: what does all this funding and effort achieve?”

Although the number of countries providing “democracy promotion” aid has increased, and the size of contributions and ambition of the programs have also expanded, most state-backed activity is still bilateral, rather than multilateral. Joint cooperation among democracies to advance mutual interests (and, implicitly, to counter Chinese influence) is most visible in the security domain, such as the ministerial-level meetings in September 2019 held by representatives from “The Quad” of Australia, Japan, the United States, and India,⁵⁴ and joint Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea by ships from the United States, India, Japan, and the Philippines in May 2019.⁵⁵ Such cooperation is much less apparent in “softer” domains, particularly those involving potentially sensitive political activities such as political party building, human

rights assessments, or promotion of media freedom and civil society capacity.

The overwhelming array of different programs, initiatives, forums, and plans that countries in the region have announced also tells us little about their ultimate impact. As always, the hardest question to answer about aid for democracy promotion and development is: what does all this funding and effort achieve? Impact assessments are notoriously difficult to conduct for capacity-building projects such as, say, legal education programs that are intended to be investments for the long term and may produce significant results only years, if not decades in the future.

In a rather perverse twist, rising Chinese influence now provides one crude but concrete way to make this assessment: has all this activity managed to counter Chinese practices, or at least to shape the behavior of China-linked firms and agencies so that they conform to democratic laws and best practices? If programs to promote development, as well as good governance, political accountability, and rule of law provide countries in the region with appealing alternatives to inducements to join BRI projects, or help to buttress democratic institutions in the face of corrupting or coercive practices from Chinese state-linked firms, then they have probably been worth it. But if democracy promotion and developmental aid are unable to effectively counterbalance Chinese appeals, then perhaps not.

For an illustration of this point, consider the recent battle between Taiwan and China over diplomatic recognition in the Solomon Islands and Kiribati.⁵⁶ Until the summer of 2019, both countries maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and, under longstanding Chinese policy, were not as a consequence recognized by Beijing. China has, however, over the last three years, engaged in a systematic diplomatic pressure campaign against Taiwan. As part of this campaign it has sought to poach some of the few remaining countries that recognize Taipei. This competition took on additional significance with the increasing concern in the US security establishment about the growing Chinese presence in the Pacific, including Chinese construction firms possi-

53 Aman Thakker and Elliot Silverberg, “India and Japan Eye the Dragon in the Room,” *Foreign Policy*, November 20, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/20/china-war-navy-india-japan-eye-dragon-in-the-room/>.

54 Ankit Panda, “US, India, Australia, Japan ‘Quad’ Holds Senior Officials Meeting in Bangkok,” *Diplomat*, November 5, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/us-india-australia-japan-quad-holds-senior-officials-meeting-in-bangkok/>.

55 Tim Kelly, “U.S., Japan, India, and Philippines challenge Beijing with naval drills in South China Sea,” *Reuters*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-usa-japan-india/u-s-japan-india-and-philippines-challenge-beijing-with-naval-drills-in-the-south-china-sea-idUSKCN1SFOLS>.

56 Steven Lee Myers and Chris Horton, “2 Pacific Nations Sever Ties With Taiwan, Bolstering Chinese Influence in Region,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2019, A7.

bly winning developmental concessions and constructing dual-use infrastructure in small but strategically important Pacific island states. As a consequence, the United States attempted to dissuade both the Solomon Islands and Kiribati from switching diplomatic recognition, in part through warnings about illiberal or shady Chinese practices, and in part by emphasizing alternative aid packages that the United States and like-minded partners and allies were already providing. That pitch failed, and the leaders of both the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched diplomatic recognition, then signed significant development agreements with Chinese firms.⁵⁷ Whatever democracy promotion and aid programs the democratic powers of the region are engaged in, they were not enough to prevent this kind of strategic setback—which suggests the need for a rethink.

5. Recommendations for Multilateral Democracy Promotion in the Indo-Pacific

China's growing power and influence in the Indo-Pacific presents the United States and like-minded partners and allies with a significant challenge. It is, however, a challenge that all democracies in the region have a common interest in meeting. The trick is to find a way to coordinate a response that is more focused, efficient, and effective than at present. The vast number of projects that the major and middle powers of the region are involved in collectively provide enough resources to at least begin to counter what China is putting into the BRI. But they need to be better coordinated in order to achieve some measure of success.

The previous discussion suggests several recommendations to help improve coordination and advance democracy promotion in the Indo-Pacific. The first is to move beyond hard security issues and put more resources into multilateral efforts to address “soft” concerns, particularly economic ones. US President Donald J. Trump's decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) early in his presidency was a strategic error that set back this effort to write new “rules of the road” for trade and investment in the Indo-Pacific that would bind all actors, Chinese

as well as US.⁵⁸ But with Japan stepping into the lead role, the remaining members managed nonetheless to agree on a modified version, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP, which came into force in December of 2018. That agreement still has much of the strategic value that the TPP did, including codifying a trading regime that can enforce judgments against Chinese firms. A future US administration would do well to consider reentering the partnership and strengthening this rules-based trading system. But barring that possibility, an expansion of bilateral trade agreements with allies and partners, such as Taiwan and South Korea, would help to reinforce a common economic front in opposition to distortionary and protectionist Chinese practices, and to lessen their dependency on the Chinese economy.

Second, a US-led multilateral effort to strengthen democratic institutions is more likely to attract support from other countries in the region if it avoids the sensitive term “democracy promotion” altogether. It would be better instead to emphasize a set of more concrete, and less controversial, reform objectives couched in more neutral language, and that other states can opt into on a case-by-case basis. To this end, the version of the FOIP concept currently being promoted by the Trump administration makes considerable sense. It provides a broad vision for what values and interests democracies in the region share and should be willing to commit resources to uphold, but it also suggests a concrete set of priorities that all FOIP programs should be designed to advance, and treats them as discrete projects. Among these are supporting an impartial, rules-based trade regime for the region; working to standardize procurement procedures, certify high-quality infrastructure investment, and promote public-private partnerships involving firms in target countries; promoting an open, interoperable, and secure Internet free from significant state restrictions; supporting good governance initiatives; and upholding international law as it applies to sea and air domains in the region, in the face of China's efforts to assert its territorial claims over the South and East China Seas. Finally, it avoids the sensitive term “democracy promotion” in favor of a set of more concrete, and less controversial, terms for these programs.

57 “Island Shopping: A Chinese Firm May or May Not Be Leasing One of the Solomon Islands,” *Economist*, October 24, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/10/24/a-chinese-firm-may-or-may-not-be-leasing-one-of-the-solomon-islands>; Yimou Lee, “Taiwan Says China Lures Kiribati with Airplanes after Losing Another Ally,” *Reuters*, September 19, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-diplomacy-kiribati/taiwan-says-china-lures-kiribati-with-airplanes-after-losing-another-ally-idUSKBN1W50DI>.

58 See, e.g., Daniel C.K. Chow, Ian Sheldon, and William McGuire, “How the United States Withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Benefits China,” *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Law and Public Affairs*, 4, no. 1 (2018): 38-80.

Nevertheless, the FOIP concept also appears especially focused on state-led initiatives, and risks marginalizing or ignoring other potentially helpful non-state actors. The third recommendation, then, is for the United States to think beyond state-to-state partnerships and continue to look for ways to empower non-state actors to advance the FOIP goals—and to encourage other democracies to do the same. Unlike China, many of the democracies of the Indo-Pacific have strong civil society sectors, featuring organizations with significant capacity and expertise and able to operate truly independently of any particular government. Domestic and international NGOs provide a potentially valuable asset in the battle to counter Chinese influence in the region and to promote democratic values and the rule of law.

For example, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) is a collection of civil society organizations from 16 Asian countries with expertise in election management and malpractice. By drawing election observers from a wide array of Asian countries (and outside the United States), ANFREL can act as a trustworthy, impartial monitor of the quality of elections, and potentially guard against foreign efforts to undermine the legitimacy of elections or attempt to sway the vote through underhanded methods. The work of independent professional groups like ANFREL can complement better resourced, but state-backed, efforts to promote democracy, development, and the rule of law in vulnerable countries in the region.

Another group of actors that democratic governments could encourage to collaborate more are universities. The pressure on academic freedom stemming from Chinese financial influence has increased considerably in the region over the past decade. Universities in most of the democratic countries in Northeast and Southeast Asia share broadly similar values and beliefs about opposing censorship on campus, but are also vulnerable to the same financial and diplomatic pressures. Building coalitions of universities to sign on to a pledge to protect academic freedom, including the right to talk about topics that are taboo in China, for instance, could both call more attention to the threat and rally public opinion behind this core democratic value.

Private firms are a third kind of actor that should play a key role in countering the expansion of Chinese influence. Facebook, for instance, has widespread penetration in most of the democracies of the region, so it wields tremendous power within these societies. But many of the free speech issues that have cropped up on its platforms are handled in-house, in its offices in Menlo Park, California,

rather than by state regulators or civil society groups in the countries of the Indo-Pacific. And partly as a consequence, Facebook's own policies for regulating speech on its platforms are inconsistent and ad hoc across issues and countries. The formation of a coalition of stakeholders, either at the government or nonprofit level, within the democracies of the region, to hash out the "rules of the road" to govern social media platforms would serve to improve accountability and promote better sources of information and opportunities for dialogue online.

In sum, the more closely a US-led, multilateral campaign is identified with hard security concerns in the Indo-Pacific, the more such cooperation takes on the trappings of an anti-China alliance, and the less willing many countries in the region will be to stick their necks out to join. In contrast, a strategy that promotes common values and practices is

“Taiwan has also developed a significant array of foreign aid and cooperation initiatives...”

likely to fare better if it focuses on “soft” concerns such as economic best practices, avoids talk of “democracy promotion” in favor of more discrete and tangible objectives such as state capacity-building, and empowers non-state actors via funding to independent foundations or institutes, support of cross-country educational exchanges, and closer coordination with private firms and international NGOs.

About the Author

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***The Asia Security Initiative (ASI)**, housed within the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, leverages strategic foresight to promote forward-looking strategies and constructive solutions for the most pressing issues affecting the Indo-Pacific region. ASI's central mission is to enhance cooperation between the United States and its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific in order to develop a community of like-minded nations that are committed to adapting, defending, and revitalizing the rules-based international system. A key piece of this mission rests on providing cutting-edge analysis and actionable policy recommendations for the United States and its allies and partners as they seek coordinated responses to the rise of China in a new era of great power competition. At the same time, ASI continues to address broader issues shaping the region's strategic environment, including traditional security issues such as nuclear proliferation and maritime security, as well as emerging challenges in non-traditional areas such as energy security, geoeconomics and changing trade architecture, infrastructure development, and disruptive technologies. Ultimately, in order to narrow the gap in understanding between Washington and the rest of the Indo-Pacific, ASI prioritizes direct engagement with regional stakeholders and voices across its program.*

***This Democratic Order Initiative** is an Atlantic Council initiative aimed at reenergizing American leadership and strengthening democratic cooperation to defend democracy and reaffirm support for the core principles of a rules-based order. In February 2019, the Atlantic Council, under the auspices of a bipartisan task force led by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, former US National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt, and former Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawauchi, prepared a Declaration of Principles for Freedom, Prosperity, and Peace—a framing document that provides a clear and compelling statement of values, a “north star,” around which political leaders in the United States and democracies worldwide can coalesce to reaffirm their support for democracy and a rules-based order. In October, the Atlantic Council released a new strategy paper, *Present at the Re-Creation: A Global Strategy for Revitalizing, Adapting, and Defending a Rules-Based International System*, co-authored by Ash Jain and Matthew Kroenig, that sets forth a comprehensive blueprint for advancing a rules-based system based upon the core principles in the Declaration.*



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