

# U.S.-ASEAN SUMMIT: DEMOCRACY PROMOTION ON THE BACKBURNER

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*As democracy comes under acute threat from rising authoritarianism across Southeast Asia, this issue brief explores whether there is a loss of U.S. leadership on democracy promotion in the region. A critical reading of the joint statement released after the ASEAN-U.S. special summit shows that the current U.S. administration has not followed through with the Obama-era practice of discussing democracy and human rights issues with Southeast Asian countries. Against the backdrop of China's rising influence, this issue brief makes a case for the Biden administration to focus democracy promotion efforts on Southeast Asia while taking into account the political specificities of these countries. President Biden must work on reversing the undeniable erosion of American soft power as a democratic role model under the previous administration, starting with engaging in difficult conversations with Southeast Asian countries, otherwise it risks losing credibility in the eyes of like-minded partners.*

*“Democracy doesn’t happen by accident. We have to defend it, fight for it, strengthen it, renew it.”*

– President Joseph R. Biden, Jr<sup>1</sup>

In stark contrast to President Trump’s diplomatic distance from Southeast Asia, President Biden has made it his administration’s priority to rebalance attention towards the region, and the ASEAN-U.S. special summit held in May this year was a positive

indication of the same. One of the key takeaways from the summit was the publicized commitment to elevate ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership which would be “meaningful, substantive and mutually beneficial”—indicating that America’s commitment to the region is not temporary. Yet, the summit did not offer much indication on how Washington plans to achieve this, with no new economic or security initiatives.

Notably, the absence of ‘democracy’ and ‘rule of law’ in the statement—although commitment to peace, security and stability of the *region* is repeatedly reaffirmed—speaks volumes. The statement also explicitly mentions commitment from both sides to “strengthen regional and global governance systems”, yet no mention is made of “good governance” which inherently has a more domestic connotation. Commitment to human rights and fundamental freedom are also mentioned only in passing, with reference to the situation in Myanmar. This is a notable departure from the previous ASEAN-U.S. summit held on American

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soil in 2016 under President Barack Obama, which explicitly mentions “strengthening democracy,” “enhancing good governance and adherence to the rule of law,” “promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms,” “encouraging the promotion of tolerance and moderation” as key principles which would guide U.S.-ASEAN relations in the future. Even the joint statement adopted in 2017 reiterated commitment from both the U.S. and ASEAN to the shared principles of democracy and good governance.<sup>2</sup> The current administration’s softer approach towards democracy, especially when it comes to engagement with Southeast Asia, was also visible in U.S. Defense Secretary Austin’s speech in Singapore last year, where he spoke about

lapses in U.S. democracy, indicating that the U.S. is moving away from its past position of having moral authority over the world as a credible champion of democracy.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, President Biden took office vowing to return the defense of democracy and protection of human rights around the world to the center of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> One of the earliest foreign policy moves of his administration was convening the first-ever summit for democracy with the aim of spurring “dialogue” and initiating “concrete action towards global democratic renewal” in December 2021, as promised in his election campaign manifesto.<sup>5</sup> President Biden has also linked the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine as a “test” for democracies around the world, stating that Ukraine was “on the front lines” in the “perennial struggle for democracy and freedom” in a major speech in Poland.<sup>6</sup> U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s controversial visit to Taiwan has also been branded as indicative of U.S. commitment to democracies around the world.<sup>7</sup> In fact, democracy has featured so prominently in President Biden’s foreign policy rhetoric that scholars of U.S. foreign policy have branded democracy promotion as a key foundation of the “Biden doctrine.”<sup>8</sup> So, how does one make sense of the exclusion of democracy in recent interactions between the U.S. and ASEAN?

## **Democracy Promotion in U.S. Foreign Policy**

The intricate relationship between democracy promotion and U.S. national security strategy has been a defining feature of U.S. foreign policy for over half a century now. American involvement in World War II was justified to the domestic public in the name of freedom, which reignited U.S. interest in democracy promotion sidelined after the 1930s Great Depression. America’s resounding victory in the war heralding its emergence as a global power was challenged by the emergence of an ideologically incompatible Soviet Union, reinforcing the notion

that international security was now more crucial for domestic security. Containment of communism, the centerpiece of President Truman's foreign policy, became synonymous with democracy promotion and Congress sanctioned huge financial resources to push countries towards democracy. Throughout the Cold War, democracy promotion was a crucial weapon in America's ideological war against Soviet-backed communism. Since the Reagan administration paved the way for bipartisan support in Congress for democracy promotion abroad, through establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy<sup>9</sup>—all U.S. presidents have supported democracy promotion, despite inconsistency in terms of the quality and quantity of such commitment.

This broad trend was reversed with the election of Donald Trump, who early into his administration indicated that democracy and human rights promotion would not be his government's foreign policy priorities. In his 2019 budget request, President Trump proposed reducing the funding for democracy programs by 40 percent from the enacted funding levels in fiscal years 2016 and 2017.<sup>10</sup> Such a position reflected the sentiments of the American

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citizens who, according to latest surveys, viewed promoting democracy in other nations as the least important foreign policy objective.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, democracy continued to backslide across the globe as evinced from the International Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance's survey that found how since 2016, the number of countries moving towards authoritarianism is approximately three times as high as the number moving towards democracy.<sup>12</sup> According to the advocacy group Freedom House, in 2017 political rights and civil liberties around the world "deteriorated to their lowest point in more than a decade," noting specifically the U.S. "withdrawal from its leadership role in the global struggle for human freedom."<sup>13</sup>

President Biden's election revived hopes that the U.S. would once again bring "democracy back on the global agenda" given his publicly professed commitment to make democratic values the "grounding wire of our global foreign policy."<sup>14</sup> The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance released in March 2021 lists "revitalizing democracy the world over" with the support of like-minded allies and partners as a foreign policy objective. America's strong democratic credentials is listed as an "enduring advantage" which will help it "prevail" in its strategic competition with China. However, reversing the Trump-era damage to America's

credentials as a global leader promoting democracy is a major challenge for Biden. Eroding bipartisan support from the Congress<sup>15</sup> and dwindling support from the American public on democracy promotion as a foreign policy objective,<sup>16</sup> further complicates matters. More than a year into the Biden administration, revived attempts at democracy promotion, most visibly through the Summit for Democracy, have come under sharp criticism for failing to deliver results.<sup>17</sup> Domestically, America is struggling with democratic decline within its own borders,<sup>18</sup> which has raised questions on its authority and capability to promote democracy abroad. President Biden's rallying call for democracies to unite to support Ukraine has failed to strike a chord with major democracies around the world, including India—the world's largest democracy has maintained a position of neutrality<sup>19</sup> despite U.S. attempts to get New Delhi's explicit support.<sup>20</sup>

### **Southeast Asia's Troubled Relationship with Democracy**

The election of the namesake son of late dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines earlier this year revived concerns about the health of democracy in Southeast Asia. The February 2021 military coup in Myanmar<sup>21</sup> which overthrew the

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civilian government was a sharp blow, not only for the hard-fought democracy of the country but also for the region as a whole. Political instability since 2018 resulting in frequent changes in governance in Malaysia led to a sharp decline in human rights in the country and increased censorship over critics of the current government.<sup>22</sup> The possible election of current defense minister Prabowo Subianto in the 2024 presidential elections in Indonesia raises more apprehensions than hope about the political future of the world's third largest democracy.<sup>23</sup> Notably, not a single ASEAN member-country was ranked “free” in Freedom House's latest annual index on political and civil rights.<sup>24</sup>

Joshua Kurlantzick assesses that “prospects for regional democracy are at their grimmest point in years” highlighting how democracy in the region has steadily regressed from “robust democracies or hybrid regimes...to outright authoritarian rule or situations in which elections are still held but democratic institutions are deteriorating.”<sup>25</sup> Although Southeast Asia does not have a long history of liberal democratic traditions, the rise of “sophisticated authoritarianism” is a relatively new and worrying development.<sup>26</sup> Further complicating the regional security environment is the rise of

China which is seen as “contributing to the general decline of democracy in the region.”<sup>27</sup> The Chinese model of growth already challenges the American correlation between democracy and economic prosperity. By repeatedly highlighting the success of an alternative political and economic model, China has successfully built ties with regional countries, which poses grave security threats to American interests as evidenced by the possible case of Chinese military presence in Cambodia.<sup>28</sup> Evidently, the human costs of rising authoritarianism are closely tied to geopolitical implications of the same, which hold the significant risk of challenging American presence in the region.

### Challenges Ahead for Biden

Handling the political diversity in Southeast Asia in a manner supportive of Washington’s security interests has always been a challenge for U.S. foreign policy. Beyond heavy rhetorical emphasis on the value of freedom and democracy, there is little to suggest that democracy promotion figures prominently in America’s Southeast Asia policy. In 2016, during his election campaign, Trump diagnosed that American foreign policy problems began with the “dangerous idea that we could make Western democracies

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out of countries that had no experience or interest in becoming a Western democracy.”<sup>29</sup> Despite the questionable approach his administration took to deal with this problem, there is some truth to this assertion. Critics, especially from post-colonial nations, have repeatedly questioned U.S. policy action which follows a strictly western-centric yardstick for measuring democracy.<sup>30</sup> The proliferation of “non-western democracy” indicates the growing recognition non-American models of democracy are garnering from countries across the world, especially rising powers.<sup>31</sup> Domestically, the American appetite for overseas engagement has further declined with the hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan, which left incomplete the bid to democratize the country.

However, a closer look at such criticism reveals that they are directed specifically towards America’s “one-size-fits-all approach” towards democracy promotion, rather than the ideal of democracy itself. History shows how since 1898, several U.S. presidents have combined military intervention and democracy promotion<sup>32</sup>—most notably during the Bush administration—and this approach has been at the center of criticism. They are not reflections on the perils of having a ‘pro-democracy’ foreign policy, rather they emphasize the need for Washington to pursue democratic values without military intervention. Afghanistan, Yemen, and

Iraq are examples that a ‘military-based’ way to bring about democracy is not the solution, but also indicate the perils of completely abandoning the cause of championing human rights and democracy in these countries. As pointed out by Jennifer Rubin, the immediate test for President Biden is to “delink” democracy promotion from military operations while also advancing “policy that extends beyond rhetoric.”<sup>33</sup>

Given the current U.S. administration’s efforts to revive the axiomatic association between United States and democracy, a first step should be to acknowledge the past mistakes of unilateral, military-based approaches to spreading democracy. A viable way forward for policymakers in Washington is to cooperate more prominently with long-standing democratic partners in the region such as Japan and South Korea to develop a network of democratic partners.<sup>34</sup> Cultural and historical similarities together with Japan’s own contribution to world peace and prosperity make it a suitable partner. Moreover, Japan enjoys an unprecedented level of trust among ASEAN member-countries, evident in Japan’s consistently high ranking as a trusted partner in ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute’s annual survey measuring perceptions of Southeast Asian countries.<sup>35</sup>

The task ahead is daunting, especially given the strong partisan divide over expanding the use of non-coercive measures such as sanctions to punish human rights violators.<sup>36</sup> As with previous administrations, President Biden has also been criticized for promoting democracy only against adversaries or in strategically irrelevant countries.<sup>37</sup> Yet addressing this challenge should be of immediate priority for Washington, as the Chinese have visibly expanded propaganda actions decrying “American-style democracy” and even accusing it of causing humanitarian tragedies.<sup>38</sup> Ignoring Southeast Asia in any future efforts on democracy promotion and closing dialogue on contentious issues of human rights abuses—as evidenced by the latest U.S.-ASEAN summit—will only further harm U.S. interests.

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