

Sunnylands Initiative

Odawara Statement

August 2, 2022

The members of the Sunnylands Initiative on Enhancing Democratic Partnership in the Indo-Pacific, a partnership of thought leaders from Australia, Japan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Republic of Korea, Taiwan, and the United States, met in Odawara, Japan, on August 1-2, 2022, to translate vision into action. This second convening of the Sunnylands Initiative, held during a critical moment for democracy, reaffirmed the principles¹ and commitments articulated during the inaugural meeting held in January 2020 to advance a shared vision for cooperation among Indo-Pacific nations and peoples, and to strengthen democratic governance, practices, and norms across the region.

In the absence of a regional architecture to defend and bolster civil liberties and the rules-based order in Asia, we aim to serve as a regional platform where democratic stakeholders, from policymakers to academics and civil society leaders, can debate and develop strategies to institutionalize these principles and support democratic development in the region. We also aim to foster solidarity among actors working in common cause, anchored in the understanding that democracy is the best guarantor for security, peace and prosperity.

Since we last met, democracy has come under assault in the Indo-Pacific region, from Hong Kong to Burma to Afghanistan, while Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine threatens peace across Europe and beyond. Against the backdrop of Covid-19 and the concomitant deleterious economic, political and health effects, resurgent authoritarianism, illiberal domestic political forces, social and economic inequality, environmental disaster, and rampant corruption fuel the democratic decline. Even established democracies face serious threats, including disinformation, political polarization, illiberal populism, and a lack in confidence in elite governing structures. Moreover, Taiwan faces constant and immediate threats to its vibrant democracy.

In the face of these challenges, citizens around the world continue to aspire and struggle for freedom and fundamental rights, and demand their societies to be more open, transparent, accountable, and inclusive. Democrats continue to carry on their advocacy and struggle, working to ensure their movements remain focused, relevant, and effective.

For democracy to thrive in the face of manifold challenges, it must demonstrate that it can deliver tangible benefits better than the alternative systems. Democracy is more than just an election process; it is the only system of governance that protects the principles enshrined in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. By respecting civil liberties and the rule of law, democracies are better positioned to provide equitable access to health, education and economic development, and ensure accountability. Effective checks and balances on political leaders ensure their mistakes can be corrected, and considerably deter aggression and war.

For democracy to deliver, it requires a whole-of-society approach that rests on the participation of diverse stakeholders, including independent media, business, labor, academia, civil society, women, youth, minorities, politicians, religious organizations, local government, and the broader public.

¹ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/sunnylands-principles-enhancing-democratic-partnership-indo-pacific-region>

Despite recent challenges, the Indo-Pacific region, home to strong, dynamic and diverse democracies in each of the subregions, has made remarkable political strides. The Sunnylands Initiative celebrates this impressive progress and will work to strengthen a regional commitment to democratic development.

The Sunnylands Initiative envisions its role as a facilitator and convenor of discussions on the shared norms and values that define democratic societies, ways in which democracy can deliver, and the crafting of regional partnerships that can uphold the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region.

To this end, democratic countries in the Indo-Pacific must engage in democracy support, confident in the conviction of our shared values and ideals while recognizing that democracy is a work in progress by definition. Democracy support cannot flourish as a government to government initiative alone, rather, civil society must engage stakeholders in a context-specific, bottom-up approach that reflects the will of citizens. Civil society organizations, local politicians, independent media, think tanks and other non-governmental actors have an important role to play in international cooperation through identifying and sharing strategies for defending human rights, combatting disinformation, exposing corrupt money in politics, and supporting free and independent media. By cultivating networks of stakeholders and supporting the development of mechanisms of support for democratic governance, practitioners in the Indo-Pacific can move from aspiration to solidarity to action.

To facilitate the adoption of these recommendations, the Sunnylands Initiative will organize a dialogue series with key government and nongovernmental stakeholders across the region to strengthen understanding and the application of shared democratic principles in policymaking and democratization support at a national and regional level. The next Sunnylands Initiative dialogue will aim to engage more stakeholders from the Pacific Islands region.

We will work to amplify the principles articulated in the Sunnylands Statement of Shared Democratic Principles through partnership with multilateral frameworks, regional platforms and networks, and policy influencers.

We will facilitate collaborative initiatives and networks among democratic stakeholders to promote shared norms and values, including the creation of a regional democratic architecture.

We will encourage support for independent media and civil society organizations, including the possibility of establishing new funding mechanisms. We urge stronger leadership by regional democracies.

We will look to address the urgent needs of displaced activists across the region by strengthening regional initiatives to provide refuge, fellowships, and operational and programmatic support.

We urge governments in the region to prioritize their support to democratic governance and norms in their foreign policy, development cooperation, and national security strategies.

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