

Written Testimony by Derek Mitchell
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U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee,
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“Stemming a Receding Tide: Human Rights and Democratic Values in Asia”
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Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Yoho, distinguished members of this Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak with you today about a critical region, and issues I believe are crucial to America’s strategic interests – democracy and human rights.

I have spent the last 30 years focused on Asia, both in and out of government. Today, as the president of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), I lead a global organization that works in more than 70 countries to support those working to build and sustain democracy. For nearly four decades, NDI – working alongside our partners at the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Endowment for Democracy – has assisted the development of political parties, legislatures, civil society organizations and other institutions that form the foundation of healthy democracies.

We have done our democracy work thanks to sustained bipartisan support in Congress, including from this subcommittee, for which we are grateful. That support makes the world more stable, secure and prosperous, and America safer. It also speaks to the core of America’s creed that affirms the universality of values of democracy, human rights, and equal human dignity.

NDI has a long history of democracy building in Asia. In fact, the first international election mission that NDI and IRI jointly observed was the 1986 election in the Philippines. Today, NDI maintains nearly a dozen offices in South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific.

And last week we just received clearance from the Taiwan government to open an office in Taipei, which we will do soon. That office will allow us to broaden and deepen our work in the region, and leverage Taiwan’s own tremendous democratic vitality in that effort.

Defining Challenge

I commend the committee for calling this hearing, as we truly are at an inflection point in history. As we seek to stem the receding democratic tide, we confront conditions we have not faced since at least the end of the Cold War, exacerbated by an unprecedented global pandemic.

In my view, the defining issue of our time is what rules, norms and values will guide nations and serve as the foundation of the international system in the 21st century.

Will the world return to spheres of influence, or will independent nations – large and small – have equal rights to protect their sovereign interests?

Will a country's majority population have the right to impose itself unconditionally on minorities, or should minority populations have equal rights and protection?

Should truth and free expression remain paramount values? Or does the state determine who can say what and when?

Does national security require an Orwellian surveillance system that watches your every move? Or will nations organize themselves under the assumption that true security will only come through a community of open societies and free peoples?

Are human beings just masses ready to be manipulated by greater power? Or do they have inherent individual sovereignty?

What is more important – the glory of the state or the dignity of the individual?

When I was cutting my teeth 30 years ago, both Asian and non-Asian commentators commonly advanced a theory of Asian exceptionalism: that so-called “Western” values of democracy and human rights are somehow alien to Asian culture, lack foundation in Asian history, and thus are unnatural to Asian society.

But for all the talk of regression in recent years, it is important to note that East Asia's history since the late 1980s has fundamentally belied this theory. For much of the past 30 years, the region has enjoyed a rush of democratic change and advancement of human rights, accompanied by an unprecedented level of stability overall and dynamic economic growth.

When presented the opportunity, the people of Asia, like others around the world, have demanded that their voices be heard and respected. The yearning for individual rights, personal freedoms, and transparent, accountable and inclusive governance remains strong in Asia as elsewhere.

The Asia Challenge

And of course, Asia matters – crucially. Asia is home to the world's largest democratic country (India) its largest Muslim-majority country, and democracy (Indonesia); five critical treaty allies – Japan, Korea, Australia, Thailand and the Philippines – who

historically have shared our values and interests and served as crucial partners in propelling regional development and security; and an array of other highly vital and diverse nations in various stages of development that run the full gamut of democratic progress, regression, and conditions in between.

At the same time, Asia is also home to a rising superpower, the world's largest country – China – which harbors a very different vision for the region, if not the globe.

Asia thus belies generalization. But given the weight of its economic, demographic, military, and cultural power, how political developments play out in Asia will go far to determine the future of democratic norms and values around the world. And that in turn will have a direct impact on American security and prosperity in the coming century.

As the title of this hearing suggests, democracy in Asia faces increasing headwinds. Economic underdevelopment, weak institutions, corrupt elites, and deepening ethnic, religious, and socio-economic divisions have created a well of insecurity and popular dissatisfaction that is being exploited by demagogues and other undemocratic forces.

Authoritarian opportunists are seizing on the pandemic to close civic space and assault fundamental freedoms. The limited space for mass gatherings and other campaign activities is also complicating holding of credible, inclusive and transparent elections, potentially exacerbating civic tensions and corroding democratic norms.

At the same time, new digital technologies have both empowered and undermined democratic forces. In Taiwan, the rise of a volunteer corps of young digital “hackers” were able to counter disinformation in real time, and proliferate factual information in its place, to help the island hold successful [elections](#) in January 2020, and remain uniquely resilient against COVID-19. Organizers of mass demonstrations in Hong Kong used digital technology to reach millions of citizens, offering a model of creativity and agility that is being picked up by others, including those in Thailand.

That said, disinformation over social media platforms continues to exacerbate social and political divisions, undermine democratic discourse, and promote hate against targeted – typically minority and marginalized – populations.

Furthermore, China is pioneering the testing and deployment of an Orwellian-style [state surveillance system](#) that threatens to give authorities the final word on free speech, free association, and free assembly. What started as a method to ruthlessly control the Uyghur population in Xinjiang is not staying in Xinjiang. And for all its current potency, that system is only in its infancy. Beijing has demonstrated no hesitation to export these technologies to any and all customers without democratic safeguards, and use the

potential of its telecom companies to corner the global market in 5G to spread these capabilities, and the values inherent, even more widely.

While not the reason for democratic regression in Asia, in these and other ways China's growing power and influence is a critical enabler for the spread of illiberal values throughout the region. Chinese diplomats are increasingly brazen about interfering both directly and indirectly in the democratic politics of other Asian states, and using information operations to shape a positive image for itself and its system, and a negative one for democracy.

It is notable, however, that even those within China's borders may not prefer the Chinese model of authoritarian capitalism when allowed to speak freely, as demonstrated in Hong Kong over the past two years. To cover up this embarrassment, the Chinese Communist government prefers to shift blame for their own failure onto others, such as NDI, IRI, the NED, and others, and then violently suppress peaceful voices that have had the audacity to take Beijing at its word and defend their rights under the Basic Law.

But the world now can see the emptiness and coercive violence at the core of the CCP's system. That China fears free and open debate within its borders but seeks instead to exploit open societies to make its deceptive case abroad only reaffirms its sense of insecurity. Its need for a surveillance state demonstrates the weakness of China's system – not its strength – but makes it no less dangerous to the health and well-being of others.

Positive Signals

Despite troubling trends in Asia overall, we should not be blind to positive signals that democratic values remain strongly embedded in the region.

An expanding number of Asian nations, for instance, hold reasonably free, fair and credible elections on a regular basis, and citizens' expectations for them are high. In Malaysia, citizens voted in 2018 to expel the only ruling party the country ever had amidst reports of extraordinary corruption, and electoral conditions few expected would allow their collective voice to be heard. Likewise Maldivians the same year turned out a corrupt and oppressive president backed by China when few expected a free and fair election to be possible.

Civil society watchdog organizations and the media continue to fight for their rights in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, to preserve democratic norms, protect shrinking civic space, and promote political reforms.

Mass popular movements throughout the region in recent years also demonstrate widespread demand for political reform, and for governments to be accountable. Recent mass demonstrations in Bangkok reveal a continued robust democratic spirit in Thailand, despite military domination of politics since the 2014 coup, a constitution rigged in its favor, threats to protestors' personal safety, and deep social cleavages. In Cambodia, only brutal repression has prevented similar public displays.

Young people are driving many movements for change in south and southeast Asia. Including an increasing number of women, these young people represent an alternative, more vital future for democracy in Asia. Their dissatisfaction with the status quo is not manifested in greater demand for autocratic leadership and authoritarian values, but for more social justice, economic opportunity, free speech, transparency and accountability of governance, and often a greater role in the public affairs of their country.

In other words, they do not seek less democracy but more – and better – democracy.

This opportunity, however, involves a challenge: should their expectations fail to be met, should governments fail to be responsive to their young citizens, should political and civic space not open up for new generations, and should countries fail to deliver economic opportunity to the growing youth population in Asia, frustration could reach a boiling point, with effects felt not only within a country but across borders.

How to Meet the Moment

In Asia, as elsewhere, it is essential that those who believe in principles of freedom and democracy stand together in solidarity – across borders – to promote and defend these values, to protect them at every turn, peacefully, against those who would attack or degrade them. Tides that recede can roll in again. But they rarely do so without assistance, gravitational or otherwise.

To both stem and reverse this tide will require multiple strands of effort. America cannot and should not stand alone, but must continue to work together with our partners in Europe, Canada and elsewhere to assist struggling peoples in Asia. Our democratic allies and partners in Asia – Japan, Korea, Australia, India, Indonesia, Taiwan, etc – can do more to strengthen their democracies at home, and promote and support their neighbors in the interest of broader regional stability, security, unity and development.

We all should build partnerships with civil society and the private sector in this effort, creating networks of common purpose to create a normative model for the region. Digital technology companies and platforms must do their share to serve as responsible stewards of civic empowerment, assuming responsibility, applying necessary resources, and taking appropriate action to counter those who exploit their creations to promote hate, division, and disinformation.

We should follow Global Fragility Act guidelines to prioritize investment in democratic governance in fragile states and countries in transition as a *sine qua non* for success.

We should elevate the democratic rights of women, young people and other traditionally marginalized communities throughout Asia, to bring new generations and perspectives to the table, ensure the rights of all are equally safeguarded, and ensure fresh approaches are applied to new challenges of the 21st century. In Afghanistan and Myanmar, for instance, women should participate fully in ongoing peace talks if democracy, justice and lasting peace are to be truly secured in those fractious and longstanding conflicts.

Finally, the United States and its allies must be prepared for the long game. Democracy is never easy, it is rarely linear, and it is forever a work in progress. We must stay engaged – over the long term – whether a single election goes well or poorly, and political conditions seem to be advancing or receding. We must neither succumb to euphoria or fatalism; never lose heart or lose faith.

That is why NDI is redoubling its efforts throughout Asia. With Congress's support, we and our partners will continue to do our part to affirm the essential dignity of every individual and protect the sovereign independence of every nation's citizens to chart their own path forward without malign external interference. We will continue to help people to develop the tools and capacity to defend their democratic rights and interests, and ensure democracy delivers according to its profound promise.

Doing so is not only the right thing morally but fundamental to a safe and secure world. These values are universal values, and our promotion of them makes allies of the billions of people around the world who are struggling for the dignity to be heard and to have a say in their own futures.

Again, I want to thank the Chairman and Ranking Member, and members of this Committee again for your support for U.S. democracy assistance efforts worldwide.

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