

STATEMENT OF DEAN THOMPSON, ACTING ASSISTANT SECRETARY, BUREAU OF SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS, BEFORE THE HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Chabot, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for inviting me to testify on democratic values in the Indo-Pacific in an era of strategic competition with the PRC and Russia. I am honored to be here today alongside my State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development colleagues to discuss this critical issue.

South Asia is a cornerstone of the U.S. vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific. From the world's largest democracy in India to one of its smallest in Maldives, the democratic tradition remains strong in South Asia. Nevertheless, a number of challenges – including corruption, intimidation of journalists and civil society organizations, and the lure of “quick and easy” authoritarian solutions to problems such as the COVID-19 pandemic – continue to threaten those traditions. The threat is compounded by the harmful influence of governments such as China and Russia, making the work we do to bolster these governments' and citizens' ability to recognize and combat this malign influence that much more important.

The ability of governments to uphold the basic democratic values that enable democracy and the rule of law is an essential component to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region. Our goal continues to be working with our partners inside and outside government to maintain and strengthen those values as well as to cement gains in human rights and religious freedom.

Sri Lanka

In Asia's oldest democracy, Sri Lankan elections are largely free and fair, and non-violent, despite its troubled history. While the COVID-19 pandemic limited international monitoring, domestic observers judged presidential and parliamentary elections held in 2019 and 2020 to be free and fair, as well as peaceful and well-managed.

While we have pledged to work with Sri Lanka's democratically elected leaders, we take seriously the challenges posed by the increased militarization of government functions and diminished space for civil society. In October 2020, President Rajapaksa used his coalition's supermajority in parliament to pass a constitutional amendment that consolidated power in the executive and reinstated most of the president's constitutional powers that had been abolished in 2015.

Nepal

In Nepal, we are working with the government to advance its transition to federalism by building the capacity of the national and local governments to become more transparent and accountable.

Nepal is a young federal democratic republic, with the 2015 constitution establishing the current system of government. It has made some progress in its democratic journey, including by improving the lives of its citizens and protecting political rights, and observers have characterized elections as generally well-conducted. The past year has seen some contentious political infighting, though it remained within the confines of the law and disputes have been

settled through the courts. President Bhandari dissolved Parliament for the second time in five months on May 22 after Prime Minister Oli failed a vote of confidence. New elections are planned for November. We call on all parties to continue to resolve differences peacefully and through legal, constitutional, and electoral means.

Although Nepal has a recent history of a relatively free and open media, freedom of expression is not fully protected under the law. Some officials regularly threaten it with newly proposed laws restricting speech in some form, particularly with social media.

Bhutan

Bhutan is a democratic success story in South Asia. In 2018 Bhutan conducted its third democratic election since the Fourth King of Bhutan abdicated absolute power and paved the way for parliamentary elections in 2008. The 2018 election was widely viewed as free and fair, and the reins of government passed peacefully from one political party to another. Although we do not have formal diplomatic relations with Bhutan, we maintain warm, informal ties. Our investment in people-to-people exchanges has led to a robust relationship with their government, whose leadership consists of many alumni of U.S.-government funded International Visitor Leadership Programs and Humphrey Fellowships. In recent years we have expanded our cooperation with Bhutan through STEM programs, headed by USAID, NASA, and the State Department. We hope to build on this by beginning cooperation on clean city initiatives and combatting climate change with the only carbon negative country on the planet.

Maldives

The 2018 election of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih ushered in a new chapter in Maldivian history and placed the country on a clear upward trajectory on democratic governance and human rights metrics. With nearly 90 percent of the eligible population voting, this was a clear expression of the Maldivian people's commitment to democracy. The country voted for reform to reverse years of increasing corruption and authoritarian tendencies. We quickly mobilized support for President Solih's reform agenda after the election to help bolster the country's democratic institutions and good governance.

Following multiple delays caused by the pandemic, Maldives held free and fair local council elections in April 2021. These elections were particularly consequential as they were the first local elections held after 2019 legislative amendments that devolved fiscal and planning responsibilities to more than 200 island, city, and atoll councils. In addition, the introduction of a quota of 33 percent female representation on the councils helped lead to a record number of women candidates winning election. The United States is supporting Maldives' efforts to build stronger, more inclusive local governance, and we continue to support the country's broader work to strengthen democratic institutions and rule of law.

India

India remains the world's largest democracy with a strong rule of law and independent judiciary and enjoys a strong and growing strategic partnership with the United States. Its Constitution mandates a secular state that upholds the rights of all citizens to practice religion freely, freedom

of expression and speech, and equal treatment before the law. India has a long history of free and fair elections with members of all faith communities participating and holding office.

However, some of the Indian government's actions have raised significant concerns and are inconsistent with India's democratic values. CSOs and media sources have reported the growing use of sedition laws to restrict freedom of expression and justify the detention of human rights activists and journalists. We are concerned about obstacles to the important role of civil society, such as India's Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), which in some cases has hampered NGOs COVID-19 response efforts and has reportedly been used to constrain CSOs critical of the government, including Amnesty International India.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh serves as an example for many countries around the world, as it has made impressive strides in economic growth and poverty reduction. Bangladesh remains a key Indo-Pacific partner for the United States in maintaining regional stability, countering terrorism, expanding two-way trade, and expediting development, as well as in hosting more than 900,000 Rohingya refugees since 2017. We have emphasized that fully respecting civil and political rights and improving transparency and accountability will contribute directly to its aspirations for Least Developed Country (LDC) graduation and global competitiveness.

However, we remain concerned about respect for fundamental freedoms in Bangladesh and the country's democratic trajectory. We continue to believe it is critical for the Bangladesh government to allow civil society organizations and labor unions to operate; for individuals and groups to be able to express their views freely; and for political opposition to play its lawful role in a functioning democracy. Civil society is threatened by a shrinking space for activism and prohibitive draft regulations, and faces public criticism, including towards humanitarian workers responding to the Rohingya crisis. Journalists continue to self-censor for fear of the Digital Security Act, legislation introduced in 2018 to prosecute cybercrimes but also used as a legal instrument to effectively criminalize forms of nonviolent speech, both online and offline.

PRC Influence

Across the Indo-Pacific, the PRC government uses a combination of economic levers and soft power to pressure countries to align with its interests. Common issues among South Asian countries include strong ties between local political elites and PRC economic interests, widespread political and economic corruption, and a lack of ready alternatives to PRC financing, creating a climate of dependency. The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many SCA countries' already high debt burdens to PRC entities, and many countries are now looking to Beijing for assistance to revive their economies or avoid debt restructuring. These conditions limit the flexibility and independence of many countries in their bilateral relationships with the PRC, weaken their institutions and the rule of law, and increase support for PRC government priorities within international organizations. Nevertheless, in South Asia, while most countries seek to maintain positive relationships with the PRC, they actively seek to diversify their international relationships to avoid becoming too dependent on Beijing.

Fostering a Resilient Democratic Environment

Supporting Civil Society

SCA supports Indo-Pacific governance objectives in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka through the \$14 million South Asia Small Grants Program, run in partnership with The Asia Foundation. Projects seek to support civil society and independent media to strengthen civic participation and democratic principles, enable citizen access to credible information, build trust in participatory governance, and increase communities' resilience to foreign malign influence and corruption. The program aims to build local civil society capacity by professionalizing organizations, expanding the space for engagement, and building networks across countries to address common challenges.

These grants give us fresh eyes on the overall progress and challenges of sub-national governance to build participatory, inclusive governance. Grantees take on the projects most relevant to their communities. Some evaluate local government ability to deliver on services. Others assess budget transparency or build the messaging capacity of their local and provincial governments.

The program has allowed us to expand Embassy contacts, especially outside of capital cities. We have already learned a great deal about conditions on the ground from individual grantees. The program is proving to be an effective tool for creating new national and cross-border networks for civil society organizations. Throughout the pandemic, small organizations have supported each other professionally through the networking the program makes possible.

Civil society groups were quick to recognize the pandemic as a crisis in governance as well as in health. The South Asia Small Grants Program's flexibility allowed the bureau to quickly support civil society and the media's watchdog role in tracking local government responses to the pandemic. One group in Bangladesh closely scrutinizes the implementation of local stimulus packages for pandemic relief, and seeks to build their local government's institutional capacity, free from political patronage and vested interests, and inculcate the values of transparency and local stakeholder accountability. Another organization provides rapid response support of journalists and media workers during the pandemic, promoting freedom of expression, free flow of information, and safety and security for journalists. We fund grassroots organizations because we know that democratic progress will largely depend on their success.

Public Affairs programs in India utilize a variety of grants and programs to raise awareness and increase civil society support for issues such as women's empowerment, the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons, trafficking in persons (TIP) prevention, religious harmony and freedom, and press freedom. These programs target both established opinion leaders such as university faculty, civil society leaders, and government officials, as well as emerging voices such as students and social media influencers.

Public Outreach and Support for Media Freedom

Although foreign malign influence can take a variety of forms, as I've highlighted, Public Diplomacy supports and strengthens mitigation efforts across the spectrum of such corrupt, covert, and coercive activities. Many of our speaker programs, American Space event, cultural collaborations, media interviews, social media posts, and exchange programs are part of a

sustained, long-term campaign to build affinity with U.S. values, empower local voices, and build networks of influence that can challenge foreign malign influence on their own.

Public Affairs officers also work with local partners on programs specifically designed to help local media expose malign influence efforts. As an example, last fall Embassy Kathmandu recently worked with a local grantee on a program to train journalists in curbing mis- and disinformation, using thousands of news items as case studies for fact checking. Ambassador Randy Berry personally supported the program on Twitter, citing, “a commitment to fact-checking, an invigorated sense for preventing misinformation and the pledge to promote responsible journalism.” His posting garnered public support, including from the local grantee partner.

Our outreach efforts also focus on highlighting our positive and productive bilateral partnerships in the region and improving the understanding local populations have of U.S. assistance to their countries. In addition, U.S. Public Diplomacy programs are assisting to combat foreign malign influence by increasing the penetration of objective and accurate news stories; elevating public awareness about disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda, including through media literacy programs; promoting investigative journalism; and supporting the work of civil society and fact-checking organizations.

Advancing Gender Equity and Equality

In line with the Administration’s view, SCA has long recognized the value to democracy of advancing the Women, Peace and Security agenda and women’s economic empowerment. Women in civil society are an underutilized asset in advancing U.S. policy goals in the region, including in strengthening countries’ ability to protect their sovereignty; reducing regional tensions; and advancing inclusive solutions for supporting regional integration and more responsive governance. Throughout our programming and diplomatic engagements, the bureau also defends and promotes human rights and addresses discrimination and inequity, particularly for women and girls, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalized populations.

The bureau advances Women, Peace and Security through diplomatic engagement and programming supporting women’s access to meaningful political participation and leadership, including addressing the human security risks of climate change; enhancing the meaningful participation of women in ceasefire and peace negotiations, reconciliation, and political processes; promoting the prevention of gender-based violence through political accountability and more efficient judicial processes; promoting the development, implementation, and revision of partner countries’ National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security; and deepening our gender analyses and gender integration through increased reporting on the gender dimensions of core policy priorities while enhancing the integration of key findings into our policies. Recognizing that women’s leadership in security, politics, and the economy is key to inclusive security, economic growth, and stable democracies, SCA will continue to utilize U.S. participation in multilateral fora, defense, and security cooperation agreements to advance these objectives.

Supporting and Expanding Regional Architecture

We support contributing to regional frameworks in South Asia that can promote unity and support the region's free and open order, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Our work with multilateral groups such as the Quadrilateral Dialogue (U.S.-Japan-Australia-India) coordinates joint action on shared concerns. These groups serve as significant fora for coordinating COVID-19 pandemic relief, responding to PRC malign influence activities, and resisting PRC efforts to dominate information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure.

The United States, Australia, India, and Japan meet in the "Quad" format to advance shared Indo-Pacific goals, push back on authoritarian pressure in the region, and strengthen India's growing strategic orientation toward the Indo-Pacific. Quad coordination serves as a key avenue for enriching the U.S.-India global comprehensive strategic partnership and deepening India's bilateral ties with Australia and Japan. The inaugural Quad Leaders Summit on March 12 underscored the Quad's commitment to addressing climate change and the health and economic impacts of COVID-19, and to cooperate on areas of mutual interest including critical and emerging technologies, cybersecurity, infrastructure investment, countering disinformation, and democratic resilience in the Indo-Pacific. All four Quad members share strong support for ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman: Thank you and the other members of this committee for your continued support of these vital efforts. Our ability to invest our time and resources on these critical issues in South Asia remains in our national interest. Our support for these core democratic values helps build a more free and open Indo-Pacific region, enhancing good governance, improving security, and facilitating human development.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I welcome your questions.