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Democratic Values in the Indo-Pacific in an Era of Strategic Competition

Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Chabot, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify on the very important and timely issue of democratic values in the Indo-Pacific in an era of strategic competition. We would also like to thank the Subcommittee for its continued leadership in advancing U.S. interests and supporting our engagement within the Indo-Pacific region.

As both President Biden and Secretary Blinken have said, the Biden-Harris Administration is committed to putting democratic norms and institutions at the center of U.S. policy. Democratic values hold the key to freedom, prosperity, peace, resilience, and dignity. The United States recognizes that our future prosperity and security are inextricably tied to the Indo-Pacific region, and so the region is a leading U.S. foreign policy priority. Maintaining strong ties with peoples of the region allows us to reinforce the international rules-based order and buttress democratic values and human rights across the region. At the same time, we must focus on the role of civil society in the region to advance values that underpin stability, peace, and prosperity including transparency, good governance, and respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Regional Overview

During this era of strategic competition, the Indo-Pacific is the most dynamic and fastest-growing region on Earth. Significantly more people in South and Southeast Asia are living in democracies than 35 years ago, although millions still live under repressive and authoritarian governments. Across the region, we have seen backsliding in democratic governance and respect for human rights, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Strategic competitors deploy coercive measures and push disinformation to weaken nascent democracies as well as authoritarian systems with weak institutions in an effort to reshape the international order. Some governments, fearing the fragility of their internal power structures, have sought to increase control over their populations, resulting in an erosion of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. This has led to a rise in attacks against human rights defenders; increased censorship and surveillance of a range of groups including journalists, media organizations, trade unions, civil society, members of religious and ethnic minority groups, and political opposition both online and offline. Increased gender-based violence; exploitation of labor, including forced and child labor; impunity; and erosion of the rule of law accompany this increased repression.

We pursue our goals in the Indo-Pacific region by strongly supporting the advancement of democracy, good governance and transparency, rule of law, and human rights. We work to strengthen our relationships with the people of the region and their democratically elected governments. We seek to strengthen core institutions of democracy and protect and promote human rights. Promoting democracy and human rights in the Indo-Pacific region and around the world is not just the right thing to do; it also strengthens our strategic presence and advances our strategic interests. It is the best inoculation against regional pressures and malign influence. It helps build more stable societies, it supports our economic goals, it empowers citizens to hold their governments accountable, and it aligns American leadership with the aspirations of everyday people in the region, strengthening bonds that will last generations.

Cooperation with Likeminded Partners and Allies

As President Biden and Secretary Blinken have emphasized, partners and allies are our greatest strategic asset, and they are central to achieving our collective goals in the Indo-Pacific. Our commitment to the expansion of democratic development and human rights creates responsible and reliable partners who share our most fundamental values. Our democratic partnerships enable us to present a common front and a unified vision to promote high standards, international rules, and accountability and to ensure the international system continues to deliver for all. We work with our allies and partners, including civil society and human rights defenders, to modernize international cooperation to address the challenges of this century. Our partners in the region are more likely to work with us on these issues if they know that the United States remains committed to maintaining our leadership in the region and that we will stand by them in moments of need. To advance the vision we share with so many of the region's people, we must be present and principled at the same time.

The United States works at every level to strengthen our longstanding alliances, deepen bilateral partnerships, and cooperate closely with multilateral organizations and groupings in the region. The fact that President Biden's first two bilateral summits were with Japan and the Republic of Korea demonstrate the importance of these alliances to ourselves and our goals in the region. We will strengthen and stand with our allies, work with likeminded partners, and pool our collective strength to advance shared interests and deter common threats. The United States works with regional leaders such as the Republic of Korea, India, New Zealand, and Taiwan, with allies such as the Philippines and Thailand, and with partners such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, to strengthen their resiliency and ability to deter foreign malign influence, including from Beijing. We will also work with multilateral organizations, partnerships, and multistakeholder initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership to advance our values. We will continue to engage with civil society through frameworks such as the U.S.-Taiwan-Japan Global Cooperation and Training Framework.

Regional Groupings: The Biden Administration sees the **Quad** partnership between the United States, India, Japan, and Australia as a key vehicle to advance our shared vision for the Indo-Pacific. Our key deliverables include cooperation on COVID-19 vaccines, climate change, and critical and emerging technologies, as well as encouraging the Quad to have a greater focus on

promoting democratic resilience and countering foreign malign influence. Our strategy to increase cooperation with **ASEAN** seeks to uphold the rules-based system that underpins regional prosperity and stability. As we face dangerous trends in the region, we will focus on expanding ASEAN's institutional capacity, particularly the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights and other human rights focused mechanisms, in order to help overcome these challenges. The **Pacific Islands Forum** and other multilateral organizations in the region are valuable platforms to discuss and advance shared interests, first and foremost being climate change which is considered the number one national security concern for Pacific Island countries and territories. The United States is a founding member of the **Pacific Community** and we support its work in the Pacific Islands on disaster resilience, environmental protection, health, renewable energy, human rights, women's empowerment, and sustainable economic development for more than 70 years. And, our early re-engagement in the **UN Human Rights Council**, rejoining the Council's core group on Sri Lanka, and work on the Sri Lanka and Burma resolutions demonstrates this commitment.

Foreign Malign Influence

The Indo-Pacific region is increasingly troubled by economic coercion, elite and media capture, and covert and corrupt political influence by authoritarian powers. Both PRC and Russia have invested heavily in efforts to check U.S. strengths and prevent us from defending our interests and promoting democratic institutions and norms in the Indo-Pacific region. For example, Beijing's overt military modernization coupled with aggressive use of economic leverage and support for authoritarian and abusive governments, present an urgent challenge to our vital interests in the Indo-Pacific region and around the world. The PRC is pressuring nations throughout the region to subordinate their freedom and autonomy to a "common destiny" envisioned by the Chinese Communist Party.

We will stand with our allies and partners to combat new threats aimed at our democracies, ranging from cross-border provocations, malicious cyber activities, and disinformation to infrastructure and energy coercion. We will support the PRC's neighbors and commercial partners in defending their rights and autonomy. We promote locally-led development to combat the manipulation of local priorities. We work to address corruption that leads local leaders to make decisions in their own self interest at the expense of the public good. We support Taiwan, a leading democracy and a critical economic and security partner, in line with longstanding American policies and commitments. We take measures to encourage U.S. companies doing business with the PRC to operate in line with U.S. laws and democratic norms. And we stand up for democracy, human rights, and human dignity when they are undermined by foreign actors. Our collaboration and partnership with Malaysia in assisting with investigations and the recovery of more than \$1.2 billion in assets associated with the 1MDB corruption scheme underscores our commitment to good governance.

Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka's location astride critical sea lanes that cross the Indian Ocean puts it at the center of competition in the region. Recent backsliding on major indicators of democratic governance, anticorruption, transitional justice, reconciliation, and human rights has led to

increased international attention and pressure. This has pushed Sri Lanka's government to look to Beijing for support within international organizations. The United States will continue to promote conditions for a sovereign, stable, democratic, and inclusive Sri Lanka that respects the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all persons in Sri Lanka.

Cambodia: We regularly raise our concerns about malign PRC influence and activities with the Cambodian leadership, including the major renovation project at Ream Naval Base. Through public diplomacy, the Department is raising concern over the Cambodian government's harassment and politically motivated attacks against civil society and the political opposition. These undemocratic actions coupled with weak democratic institutions and pervasive corruption make space for PRC activities that undermine Cambodia's hard-won sovereignty. Through our assistance programs, we are supporting Cambodian civil society as they press for fundamental freedoms to be respected and for responsive governance.

Democratic Backsliding, Authoritarianism, and Corruption

Democracy is backsliding and authoritarianism rising globally and in the Indo-Pacific region. To address this, President Biden committed to convening a Summit for Democracy as part of our efforts to renew democracy at home and abroad. We will also take special aim at confronting corruption, which rots democracy from the inside, defending against authoritarianism and advancing human rights.

We defend and promote human rights and address discrimination and inequity, particularly for women and girls, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalized populations. We will crack down on tax havens and illicit financing that contribute to income inequality, fund terrorism, and generate pernicious foreign influence. We will coordinate the use of economic tools, leveraging our collective strength to advance our common interests. We will work with companies, governments, and unions to ensure inclusive economic growth and promote women's economic empowerment. We will also continue to support the work of investigative journalists, civil society, and anticorruption activists to reveal corruption, support accountability, and drive reform through efforts such as the Global Anti-Corruption Consortium. We will join with like-minded democracies to develop and defend trusted critical supply chains and technology infrastructure, and to promote pandemic preparedness and clean energy. We will lead in promoting shared standards and forge new partnerships on emerging technologies, space, cyber space, health and biological threats, climate and the environment, women's empowerment, and human rights.

Burma: On February 1, the Burmese military overthrew the country's democratically elected government in a coup d'état, detaining senior civilian leaders, including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, imposing a state of emergency, and aggressively clamping down on the exercise of fundamental freedoms and access to information. The United States led the international response to the coup, working with likeminded partners and regional allies to promote a swift return to democracy, pressure the military to change its behavior, and ensure those responsible for the coup and violence against civilians are held to account. We also

continue to lead humanitarian efforts to meet the needs of people displaced within Burma and refugees who seek protection across borders, including Rohingya.

DPRK: North Korea is one of the most totalitarian and repressive states in the world, and it continues to brutalize its people, including the more than an estimated 100,000 individuals who suffer unspeakable abuses in the regime's political prison camps. The Administration just concluded its policy review and while our goal remains the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, progress on North Korea's egregious human rights situation is integral to a long-term and durable solution.

Thailand: As partners and allies, we regularly emphasize the importance of protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, and underscore the need for tangible progress in these areas in order to expand the U.S. - Thai relationship. Since 2019 national elections, we have seen the targeting of political opposition parties, as well as a continued array of challenges restricting civic space and freedoms of expression, association, and assembly.

Hong Kong: Beijing has continued to dismantle Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy, inconsistent with its obligations under the Sino-British Joint Declaration and Hong Kong's Basic Law. We will continue to speak out consistently and jointly with allies and partners to condemn moves taken by the PRC and Hong Kong authorities to undermine Hong Kong's autonomy and liberty, and we will use all appropriate tools at our disposal to impose costs for these actions. We will also urge our partners to speak out on these issues, and we will continue to assist Hong Kongers who wish to flee the deteriorating environment in the region.

Malaysia: Following several years of increasing space for public discourse, national security and media laws are once again being used by the government to target journalists, media outlets, and Malaysian citizens exercising their right to freedom of expression. In March, an emergency ordinance granted the government sweeping powers against "fake news" related to COVID-19. King Abdullah declared a nationwide state of emergency in January 2021, citing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nepal: President Bhandari dissolved Parliament on May 22 for the second time in five months and Nepal is now headed for elections in November 2021. Following the first dissolution of Parliament in December 2020, Nepal's Supreme Court intervened two months later to reinstate legislature, demonstrating the value of strong institutions. We will continue to express support for strong, accountable institutions in Nepal, and we are heartened that for the most part recent political infighting has remained within the confines of the law and disputes have been settled through the courts.

Information Manipulation

Information manipulation, whether it is through media capture, censorship, or disinformation campaigns is a global problem. China actively seeks political, economic, and strategic advantage, including through the spread of propaganda and disinformation and silencing critical voices. In the Indo-Pacific region, disinformation has profoundly changed how people vote,

obtain health care, and treat vulnerable members of minority groups. Responsible governments must not suppress factual information nor permit their officials to contribute to the spread of misinformation.

Taiwan: Taiwan is an example of a success story, showing that democracies are best positioned to defend against disinformation. In response to the PRC disinformation campaign surrounding the January 2020 presidential election, Taiwan successfully adopted a series of measures to combat the campaign that ultimately proved successful. Taiwan has also invested in long-term initiatives to counter disinformation through enhanced media literacy campaigns. The United States and Japan have also partnered with Taiwan and Sweden to train journalists from around the region in a Global Cooperation and Training Framework workshop.

Nepal: In Nepal, disinformation about the pandemic led some Nepalis to believe in spurious cures for COVID-19 as well as supposed natural immunities to it. PRC propaganda and disinformation campaigns have been used for PRC land grabs in Bhutan, Nepal, and India. The United States is funding efforts to combat disinformation and to train Nepalis to detect disinformation.

India: As large democracies, the United States and India have a special responsibility to combat misinformation with a rights-respecting approach. We seek to work with the Government of India and Internet businesses to respect freedom of expression while combatting dis- and misinformation. We believe the best response to misinformation is more, truthful information. Misinformation has cost lives in India and so has lack of access to independent information. Prior to the pandemic, misinformation led to several instances of “cow-lynchings” in which hooligans, inflamed by social media, assaulted people suspected of harming cattle. At the onset of the pandemic in India, some leveraged social media to blame Muslims for the spread of COVID-19, even going so far as to accuse their neighbors and fellow countrymen of “corona jihad”. The government levied content restrictions on and demanded content take downs of social media companies negatively impacting access to information and freedom of expression.

Freedoms of Expression, Association, and Peaceful Assembly

The Indo-Pacific region is home to a vibrant and active civil society. Countries like India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand have vibrant and diverse civil society organizations; however, the region has not been immune to a worldwide trend of repressive government restrictions on the freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. We are troubled by restrictions on both traditional and online media around the world, including in the Indo-Pacific region. In some countries, defamation and national security laws have been used to harass, intimidate, and silence journalists and bloggers.

Throughout South Asia, we see constraints on liberties such as freedom of expression and association. In **Bangladesh**, the restrictive Digital Security Act (DSA) infringes upon the exercise of freedom of expression both online and offline and targets civil society, media, the political opposition, and religious minorities. Government measures in Bangladesh restrict

freedom of expression and authorize the criminalization of defamation and slander, offenses most other democracies consider civil infractions. In **Nepal**, regulations governing the media and online environment carry criminal penalties that trigger self-censorship. **Bhutanese** internet has flourished with news on blogs and social media, though posters risk defamation lawsuits and national security charges filed against them and actively self censor. In **India**, authorities tell U.S. businesses to block social media content, including posts relating to public health, and charge or arrest journalists for the same, at the height of the country's COVID-19 surge when up-to-date information is needed most. India's enforcement of its Foreign Contribution Regulation Act resulted in the deregistration of over 1,500 civil society organizations, and closure of such prominent organizations as Amnesty International India.

The same is true in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, officials have tightened restrictions on freedom of expression, and government critics can be charged under Malaysia's sedition laws. And in countries like Vietnam, an increasing number of journalists and online activists continue to suffer harassment or remain in prison for peacefully expressing their views, despite modest improvements in respect for human rights over the last decade.

A free and open Internet as well as an independent press are instrumental in rooting out corruption and increasing government accountability. This is why access to information is critical in our democracy promotion strategy. In the region, we have seen explosive growth in Internet access and usage, sometimes catching governments by surprise, even, as they grapple with how to manage this flow of information. We believe access to information and respect for freedom of expression are important indicators of a democracy's health.

Across the region, we support more than 100 innovative programs that increase the effectiveness of local civil society organizations to improve their communities on their terms. Our programs have trained labor activists, promoted women's empowerment, and enabled citizen journalists to connect, share, and publish their work. We have used rapid response mechanisms to provide immediate relief and help to activists, civil society leaders, and their organizations when a government threatens their human rights or organizational operations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, we continue to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific region by reinforcing democratic principles, human rights and good governance. The Indo-Pacific region encompasses countries at varying stages of democratic transition. A common thread is their people increasingly demand democratic approaches—better services, more transparency, greater tolerance for and protection of religious and ethnic diversity, and expanded opportunities to participate in and benefit from economic growth. The Department of State will continue to support these countries and their people as they seek to strengthen and sustain democratic governance and protect and promote respect for human rights. With continued U.S. engagement backed by Congressional support, we are hopeful democracy will expand in the Indo-Pacific region. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and we are pleased to answer any questions you may have.