

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

## Beyond the US-China Rivalry: Developing a Shared Democratic Vision for the Indo-Pacific

Sook Jong Lee

(Sungkyunkwan University, East Asia Institute)

The lawlessness and violence at the US Capitol on January 6 were no less troubling to the people of democracies around the world than to American citizens. Policy leaders are concerned about the chilling effect of this event on the new Biden Administration's attempts to restore its leadership of global democracy. Indeed, Haass said the self-made destruction contributes to the decline of US influence and would accelerate the onset of a post-American world.<sup>1</sup> Policy experts are arguing that repairing democracy at home is not incompatible with standing up for democracy abroad and that America needs a democracy summit now more than ever.<sup>2</sup> During the campaign period, Joe Biden expressed his genuine concerns about the global democratic setbacks and called for a summit of democracies.<sup>3</sup>

This article supports the democratic coalitions between Asian democracies and the US. American leaders now have moments of their own democracy on which to truly reflect and a chance to engage Asian democracies on equal terms. But the US will need to take a more cautious and nuanced approach to such engagement in order not to be viewed by Asian democracies as merely pursuing another US rebalancing strategy against China.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Haass, "Present at the Destruction: Trump's Final Act Has Accelerated the Onset of a Post-American World," Foreign Affairs, January 11, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-01-11/present-destruction>, accessed on January 14, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Wright, "The US must now repair democracy at home and abroad," January 11, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/11/the-us-must-now-repair-democracy-at-home-and-abroad/>; Frances Z. Brown, Thomas Carothers, and Alex Pascal, "America Needs a Democracy Summit More than Ever," Foreign Affairs, January 15, 2021, [America Needs a Democracy Summit More Than Ever | Foreign Affairs](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-01-15/america-needs-a-democracy-summit-more-than-ever).

<sup>3</sup> Joe Biden, "Democracy at the Age of Authoritarianism," Speech at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit, June 22, 2018. <https://www.allianceofdemocracies.org/speech-by-joe-biden/>.

### ***The Renewal of American Democracy at Home and Abroad***

Together with collective security and open trade, democracy has been a pillar of the liberal international order which was shaped by American leadership. Democracy has been a source of legitimization of the US primacy in international politics. Both internal and external performances did matter. US demonstrations of the real practice of the core democratic values of individual freedom, minority rights, and the rule of law—often identified as “American values”—America stood as a “beacon of democracy.” But this was not sufficient to persuade others that democracy should be a pillar of the liberal international order. This persuasive power has been bolstered by the US commitment to multilateralism in which it binds itself to international rules and the willingness to restrain its power as one member state of many international organizations. From this perspective, the Trump administration’s “America First” foreign policy and disrespect for democratic values at home and abroad was an aberration in American history. While multilateralism is a way of governing international problems collectively regardless of internal political system, the “liberal” international order colors multilateralism as a specific democratic type that treats individual nations the same way that democracies treat their individual citizens. Therefore, the renewal of democracy must work for individual countries and the international order at the same time.

### ***The Liberal International Order and the China Question in Asia***

Asia has benefitted from free trade and a decades-long peace with no major wars. Democracy has been considered a form of political modernization to many countries in this region. Strong nationalism has delayed the development of rule binding regionalism, but numerous regional organizations have been formed to respond to shared problems. The presence of the US in Asia has contributed to the post-World War II peace and prosperity of the Asian region. Such peace and prosperity was possible with the US providing security with its hub and spoke alliance system, and absorbing much of exports from the region. This picture has changed with the rise of China. Asian economies are now tied to China through their supply chains and intertwined exports and investment ties. Fiengenbaum and Manning wrote in 2012 that “Economic Asia” and “Security Asia” have been colliding each other in this gradual shift. As Asians provide economic public goods to one another, they say, the US role in this region has ebbed so that Washington has focused only on

security rebalancing.<sup>4</sup> The Obama administration’s “Pivot to Asia” was one of the first US rebalancing strategies to counter the increasing Chinese influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

Under the Trump administration, the rebalancing efforts changed the mapping of the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, covering both the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The *National Security Strategy* of December 2017 recognized the growing competition between free and repressive visions of the future international order as the most consequential challenge.<sup>5</sup> *The Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* by the Department of Defense released in 2019 articulated four principles of the region’s liberal order—respect for the sovereignty and independence of all nations, peaceful resolution of disputes, free, fair, and reciprocal trade, and adherence to international rules and norms including freedom of navigations and overflight.<sup>6</sup> In the same year, the State Department’s *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* leaned away from military cooperation and towards diplomatic and economic cooperation on issues such as trade, infrastructure, energy, and the digital economy.<sup>7</sup>

Over the last few years, the US-China rivalry has come to focus on trade and technology, adding to the complexity of geopolitical competition. The region’s US allies have been pushed to choose between the US, a security patron, and China, the number one economic partner. The controversies surrounding the responsibility for the initial coronavirus outbreak in 2020 have worsened their diplomatic relations and derailed their trade negotiations. There have been voices of doubting the decoupling efforts of the Trump administration. William Burns, Biden’s nominee for CIA Director, called for the reinvention of American foreign policy between retrenchment and restoration. He said that the US and Chinese economies are too entangled to decouple and that the US would benefit more from shaping an environment in which China can rise together with the allies and partners across the Indo-Pacific who worry about China’s ascendance.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Lake said that establishing boundaries between the US and Chinese spheres of influence is fraught, and boundary disputes are open to diplomacy and the effective management of international organizations.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Evan A. Feigenbaum and Robert Manning, “A Tale of Two Asias,” *Foreign Policy* October 31, 2012. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/10/31/tale-of-two-asias-pub-49859>.

<sup>5</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Defense, United States. 2019. *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6111634-DOD-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-JUNE-2019>.

<sup>7</sup> Department of State, United States. 2019. *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*. Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. <https://www.state.gov/a-free-and-open-indo-pacific-advancing-a-shared-vision/>.

<sup>8</sup> William Burns, “The United States Needs a New Foreign Policy,” *The Atlantic*, July 14, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/united-states-needs-new-foreign-policy/614110/>.

<sup>9</sup> David Lake, “Whither the Liberal International Order? Authority, Hierarchy, and Institutional Change,” *Ethics & International Affairs*, Winter 2020.

Now, democratic Asian allies of the region are cautiously watching how the new Biden administration will reformulate the Indo-Pacific vision within his vision of democracy. The Community of Democracies was formed as an intergovernmental coalition in 2000 under US leadership, and high-level delegations from 106 countries signed the **Warsaw Declaration Toward a Community of Democracies**.<sup>10</sup> This attempt to forge a democracy coalition as one layer of the balancing China strategy appears new. Is this idea of mobilizing “Democratic Asia” going to work? The answer is conditionally “yes” when combined with a cautious and wise approach.

### *More Feasible Democratic Coalitions between the US and Asian Democracies*

Policy experts are advising the new administration about the right size for this proposed summit of democracies. Campbell, who will oversee Indo-Pacific affairs on the White House National Security Council, and Doshi have suggested democracy coalitions such as the D-10 proposed by the United Kingdom (the G-7 democracies plus Australia, India, and South Korea) on the problems of trade, technology, supply chains, and standards, and human rights coalitions among states that are criticizing China’s internment camps in Xinjiang and its assault on Hong Kong’s autonomy.<sup>11</sup> Others recommend taking a moderately big-tent approach, with a threshold to merit an invitation, and pursuing a broader agenda of democratic inclusiveness in addition to the suggested agenda items of anti-corruption digital technologies, fighting corruption, defending against authoritarianism, and advancing human rights.<sup>12</sup>

The size issue of democratic coalitions is secondary. What is important is how to frame the agenda so that Asian democracies are willing to participate and capable of achieving shared goals. There seem to be three types of democratic coalitions in which Asian democracies might be willing to engage. The first is bolstering existing democratic norms and rules in global governance. China is accelerating its efforts to pursue its national interests in global governance. Hart and Johnson identified six key categories of these efforts: shaping multilateral action, disrupting international legal regimes, shifting international norms, co-opting international organizations, creating new international institutions, and building a China-centric platform for international cooperation.<sup>13</sup> Nadege emphasized that it is “discourse power”—the ability to exert influence over the

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<sup>10</sup> <https://community-democracies.org/values/organization/>.

<sup>11</sup> Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi, “How American Can Shore Up Asian Order: A Strategy Restoring Balance and Legitimacy,” *Foreign Affairs* January 12, 2021, [How America Can Shore Up Asian Order | Foreign Affairs](#).

<sup>12</sup> Frances Z. Brown, Thomas Carothers, and Alex Pascal, “America Needs a Democracy Summit More than Ever,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 15, 2021, [America Needs a Democracy Summit More Than Ever | Foreign Affairs](#).

<sup>13</sup> Melanie Hart and Blaine Johnson, *Mapping China’s Global Ambitions*, Center for American Progress, February 20 19. [Mapping China’s Global Governance Ambitions](#).

formulations and ideas that underpin the international order—at which China aims intellectually.<sup>14</sup> China has long been criticizing the existing order as both Western-biased and unfair, and has spent the last decade attempting to sell the China model to developing countries as an alternative. Asian democracies, which share a similar history and culture, are better positioned than the West to point out the successes of Asian economies with democracy. Asian democracies can play a role in forming voting coalitions in response to China’s efforts to dilute or bend the core democratic norms and principles in global governance.

Asian democracies can better contribute to democratic norm preservation in a global rather than regional space. Logically, the United Nations is the most appropriate place for these countries to find their role in forming a bridge between Western democracies and developing countries. Plurilateral semi-governmental democratic coalitions where Asian democracies participate with Western democracies can be also useful. For example, in the “Democracies 10” where foreign ministries have convened since 2014, Australia, Japan, and South Korea are members together with Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union.<sup>15</sup> The British Prime Minister’s idea of expanding G7 to G10 by adding Australia, India, and South Korea proposed during the June summit this year will reportedly dovetail with Biden’s interest in promoting democracy as superior to authoritarianism.<sup>16</sup>

The second is developing effective regional coalitions to prevent China’s economic coercion. Asian countries want the US to make greater efforts to protect them from Chinese coercive diplomacy by using its economic influence. Individual Asian countries become helpless when facing conflicts with China since their trade and supply chains are tied to China. When South Korea introduced a missile defense system from the US in 2016, China retaliated by restricting Korean business inside China and stopping Chinese tourism to South Korea, which damaged Korea’s economy. Recently, Australia is facing similar retaliation from China. The WTO is too distant and complex to be able to effectively counter this kind of economic coercion. The US and Asian countries need to develop mechanisms to address this kind of pressure from China by collective means, whether they employ naming and shaming statements or mobilize more tangible countermeasures.

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<sup>14</sup> Nadege Rolland, *China’s Vision for a New World Order*, National Bureau of Asian Research, January 2020. [China’s vision for a new world order](#).

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/programs/scowcroft-center-for-strategy-and-security/global-strategy-initiative/democratic-order-initiative/d-10-strategy-forum/>.

<sup>16</sup> The Guardian, “UK plans early G7 virtual meeting and presses ahead with switch to D10,” January 15, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/15/uk-plans-early-g7-virtual-meeting-and-presses-ahead-with-switch-to-d10>.

Lastly but not least, Asian democracies are supporting good governance through Official Development Assistance (ODA) and other private development assistance efforts. The aid from Asian donors like Japan and South Korea used to be characterized as “developmental” or “commercial” among Lancaster’s four ideal type models of development assistance policies; diplomatic, developmental, humanitarian, and commercial.<sup>17</sup> But, their conventional focus on infrastructure and education is diversifying to include assistance in public administrative capacity and, more recently, programs aligned with Sustainable Development Goal No. 16 on peace, justice, and inclusive institutions.<sup>18</sup> The remaining issue is that these development assistance efforts by Asian democracies are carried out bilaterally with recipient countries and involve few global partnerships with other donors. The formation of aid partnerships among Asian donors, together with American or European donors, can scale up support for democracy in the region.

### **Conclusions**

Asian democracies such as Australia, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea, together with India despite its disappointing recent democratic performance, are willing to participate in US-led democratic coalitions. These countries share genuine concerns for the regional and global setbacks of democracy since the mid-2000s. Rising populism, polarized politics, and digital authoritarianism all matter. Asian democracies also share a sense of importance regarding the bolstering of democratic values and norms in regional politics since both their own democratic governance and the region’s public good hinge upon the liberal Asian order continuing to prevail. If renewed US efforts to build democratic coalitions are narrowly couched as another strategy to rebalance China, however, Asian allies and partners will be less willing to participate or remain passive after they join. Democratic Asia is likely to be more dynamic when the goal is framed in universal terms in which China issues are integrated.

Asian democracies can take a more active role in assisting democracy by proffering aid and other material capacities. A coordinated approach in scaling up the amounts of development assistance and building common aid framework principles is likely to boost this role. On the other hand, Asian countries are afraid of China’s coercive economic policies and want the US to take initiative in providing certain practical mechanisms in response. With regard to human rights issues

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<sup>17</sup> Carol Lancaster, *Foreign Aid: Diplomacy, Development, Domestic Politics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> [Korea International Cooperation Agency](http://www.koica.go.kr/koica_en/8003/subview.do), [http://www.koica.go.kr/koica\\_en/8003/subview.do](http://www.koica.go.kr/koica_en/8003/subview.do); [Japan International Cooperation Agency](https://www.jica.go.jp/aboutoda/sdgs/ku57pq00002e2b2a-at/goal16_e.pdf), “JICA’s Position Paper on SDG: Goal 16.” [https://www.jica.go.jp/aboutoda/sdgs/ku57pq00002e2b2a-at/goal16\\_e.pdf](https://www.jica.go.jp/aboutoda/sdgs/ku57pq00002e2b2a-at/goal16_e.pdf).

and other core norms and rules of democracy, many Asian democracies are likely to prefer global governance venues, especially the United Nations. Existing or newly attempted plurilateral democratic coalitions are also worthy of pursuit in highlighting the values and norms of liberal democracy. If these mixed approaches are used at the same time, the coalitions between the US and Asian democracies can work. ■

- **Sook Jong Lee** is a Professor of Public Administration at Sungkyunkwan University and Senior Fellow of the East Asia Institute. She has been directing the Asian Democracy Research Network since its formation in 2015, leading a network of about nineteen research organizations across Asia to promote democracy with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy. Her recent publications include *Transforming Global Governance with Middle Power Diplomacy: South Korea's Role in the 21st Century* (ed. 2016), and *Keys to Successful Presidency in South Korea* (ed. 2013 and 2016).

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For inquiries:  
Jinkyung Baek, Director of the Research Department

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 209) j.baek@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute  
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,  
Seoul 04548, South Korea  
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697  
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr