[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Inside the Summit for Democracy: What's Next?

Ken Godfrey (European Partnership for Democracy)
Anthony Smith (Westminster Foundation for Democracy)

The third iteration of the Summit for Democracy (S4D) in Seoul from March 18 to 20 was an improvement on several elements of previous versions of S4D but still inherited some of the challenges. With this third summit in the rearview mirror, it is a good moment to take stock of the concrete impact of the summit itself and the goals of the S4D process in the future. We argue that the S4D has significant shortcomings but still has added value moving forward if the format can be adjusted in a more pragmatic direction.

Review of the Third Summit for Democracy

South Korea taking on the role of host was significant in the evolution of the summit from its origins in the Biden administration. Of course, the US government was still very much involved as the founder of S4D but the South Korean stamp on the event was unmistakable. The desire to host was widely interpreted as based on the current government's foreign policy upholding democratic values and global cooperation. South Korea's unique legacy of successful home-grown democratization accompanied by rapid economic development is clearly appealing to the Global South. The timing, ahead of its general elections on April 10 amidst increasing political polarization at home, added an element of precautious summit preparation that contributed to rather weak general interest inside the country.

The summit, focused on 'future generations', took place over 3 days: Day 1 ministerial in Seoul, Day 2 with civil society and youth engagement and Day 3 for leaders online. A whole series of side events were also organized both in the lead up to the summit and during the 3 days in Seoul.

Despite the fact that the summit was dedicated to future generations, the lure of discussing technology, especially AI, was too strong to ignore. The Day 1 ministerial, featuring speeches from over 30 ministers (from foreign ministers to ministers of the interior) from all around the globe, was short on youth and long on tech. The South Korean government chose the Tech and Democracy theme from the list of 16 themes linked to the previously established 'cohorts' created after the first Summit for Democracy. There was no shortage of voices – from government, civil society and industry – calling for much better coordination and a regulatory approach to ensuring better oversight of technology as an urgent priority. Generative AI was central to the agenda due to the profound impact it is having on political and socio-economic life, but this probably detracted from a broader focus on the future of democracy beyond the digital sphere.

The sheer number of events on day 2 underscored the appeal of S4D to so many organizations, governments and activists. About 800 people, including more than two hundred youth from Korea, participated in the Day 2 Summit. And while 52 sessions were certainly too much for one day, there was something for everyone on the agenda including multiple sessions on the political participation of young people, disinformation, digital tools and the information environment. It was perhaps notable that only one session addressed climate change and the link with democracy. In general, this was a major improvement over previous editions of S4D in that space was given to those who wanted to take it, and credit should be given to the Korean government for taking this route. Yet, at the same time, it also resulted in a fragmentation of the collective experience of a summit. In future, it would be more effective if both days were streamlined or merged in order to better link ministers and government with civil society and youth.

Day 2 was organized by four organizations working together - the Community of Democracies, International IDEA, the Open Government Partnership and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development – that created another layer of management that allowed for ownership beyond the host government. Importantly, day 2 created a clear space for the various thematic 'cohorts' – an innovation created between the first summit in 2021 and the second in 2023 – that was missing during the last summit in 2023. It also created space for governments who were not prepared to host or co-host the summit itself to still organize sessions on priority topics.

Day 3 featured short statements by national leaders and was co-hosted by the governments of South Korea, Kenya and Denmark. The day took place online and was wrapped up by a Chair's summary that highlighted some of the key thematic focus areas dealt with over the course of the 3 days. Apart from a few genuinely new announcements, leaders mostly reaffirmed support for democracy without delving into new commitments at home or abroad.

Reflection Points on S4D So Far

Taking a step back from the 3 days in Seoul, four things stand out for S4D more generally. First, it is clear that the summit continues to mobilize those that care about democratic governance around the world and creates an opportunity for them to meet, network and discuss priorities. That is something of real value to many governments and activists but in a crowded field of events focused on rights and governance – like the OGP summit, RightsCon, Forum2000 or the Copenhagen Democracy Summit – it still needs to demonstrate that its original promise of serving as an overarching forum that can mobilize globally and deliver locally remains a realistic ambition. Therefore, while the summit covered a lot of issues, it is hard to pull out the key message on the state of democracy or, more importantly, what the top priorities are for responding to the challenges of weakening global democracy.

Second, the added value of S4D was originally the explicit focus on international cooperation on democracy and sending a political message about that cooperation. Yet, the summit has lost the political force that made it exciting at the beginning, evolving in a more technocratic direction over time. That political force was not there at S4D2 or in Seoul, perhaps because the preparatory process had much more energy than developing and implementing commitment of participating countries.

Third, the impact of S4D in terms of policy commitments remains marginal and, frankly, deeply disappointing when juxtaposed with the urgent crisis facing democratic politics worldwide. The original focus on commitments during the first summit was a central pillar of S4D but no real

mechanism has been identified to drive it forward. This poses a real question for S4D – if it not politically salient and cannot drive policy change, what is its role?

Fourth, the lack of announcement of a fourth summit underscores the fundamental challenge of hosting S4D. The success of the South Korean event was dependent on significant time and funding for the event. Thinking about the role of S4D moving forward must also be accompanied by a realistic vision for the practical elements of the process as well. So, what does this all mean for the future of S4D?

The Future Summit Process

While there was no announcement of a fourth Summit for Democracy, the Seoul Summit did conclude that a Summit process should continue. Most of the discussion of the Summit process was behind the scenes rather than in an open debate. Still, a few the signals about the future come from a combination of the 'Way Forward' section of the Chair's summary and comments by a range of stakeholders most closely involved.

The proposals shared by those key stakeholders for the future Summit process appear to have three main elements. First, it is clear that the Summit process needs to involve leaders. However, the language in the conclusions does not specify a format. Therefore, there is room for creative ideas such as holding a meeting in the margins of the UN General Assembly, adjusting the timing to be less frequent or turning it into a "COP for democracy."

Second, the conclusions commit to funding the Partners for the Engagement of Civil Society – the Community of Democracies, the Open Government Partnership, International IDEA and the OECD – to act as a secretariat for the new process. This is a critically important step to ensure strong organization of the Summit process regardless of the host government, or even in the absence of a single host country. However, while all four organizations have membership from a range of regions, including outside the 'Global North', they will need to do more to be seen as globally representative.

Third, it is likely that the future Summit process will have more open participation than has been the case so far. Some stakeholders spoke about "opt-in" participation, or about relying on civil society or the private sector to represent some countries whose governments are hostile to the democratic renewal agenda. There could also be more weight put on the activities between Summit meetings, not least since participation in any Summit will always have logistical limitations.

Whether by design or not, these steps represent an evolution away from a US-led initiative tied to the Biden Presidency, drawing on lessons from the experience of the three Summits so far. There is more to do to ensure a clear purpose and mandate for the Summit process, but there are signs of an emerging consensus about the role of the Summit process – look for example at the report of this meeting[1] in the UK in the run-up to the Summit.

Taken together, these steps would have the potential to significantly strengthen the process, in three key ways:

- **Governance** – a Summit process covering global democratic renewal needs to ensure representation and engagement from all geographic regions and all stakeholders. It also needs a credible decision-

---

[1] Wilton Park. 2024. "Summit for Democracy – the future: how to sustain international support." February 9. https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/reports/summit-for-democracy-the-future-how-to-sustain-international-support/ (Accessed March 27, 2024)

making process. Achieving this will be a critical first task for the Secretariat, building on the progress made in the first Summits. They will not be able to do this on their own but can provide clear processes and use their very wide networks to move things in the right direction.

- **Agenda** – the potential scope of the democratic renewal agenda is huge, so a lot of thought needs to go into finding the right issues to debate and propose action on. Again, the secretariat will need support from willing governments and others, but a lot has already been learned from the first three Summits that could help the process be much smoother and impactful, including how to collaborate with existing forums working on relevant issues.

- **Effectiveness** – the value of the Summit process will come from what happens in between meetings, much as from the Summits themselves. As with many similar global processes, there can be a rich ecosystem of analysis, debate and initiatives developed in between the Summits. Some of this will need to be reviewed by leaders but a lot can be taken forward in a range of other ways, with leaders meeting to reaffirm the importance of the agenda, profile the key challenges and opportunities, and to support action on a few issues. The secretariat will be key to organizing this work effectively.

Whether in their comments on democracy at a global level, or on the wide range of sectoral issues, there was no doubt that participants identified very significant challenges to democratic governance in the world. However, the Seoul Summit showed how difficult it is to shape a global discussion on such a broad issue. The decision to maintain a summit process was probably the right one, and the commitment to a secretariat is an opportunity to work out a clearer purpose and a stronger format. The success of the process will depend on strong engagement from groups from all regions, and in Asia, South Korea should clearly be playing a leading role. ∎

- **Ken Godfrey** is the Executive Director of the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD).

- **Anthony Smith** is the Chief Executive of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD).