

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Democracy in Asia under the New Trump Administration

Thomas B. Pepinsky (Cornell University)

As the United States prepares to inaugurate Donald Trump for his second term in office, democracy advocates around the world are bracing for its impact. During his first term, President Trump showed little interest in democracy: his foreign policy was entirely transactional, and he expressed admiration for authoritarian strongmen from Saudi Arabia to North Korea to Russia. Most obviously, his first term ended in a paroxysm of violence against the institutions of American democracy during the January 6th insurrection. Having failed in his attempt to overthrow American democracy in 2021, President Trump now stands triumphant again in 2025 after winning a closely fought race with Vice President Kamala Harris. With President Trump having laid bare his indifference to American democracy and the rule of law—despite having secured two victories in democratic elections—what does his second term in office portend for democracy around the world, particularly in Asia?

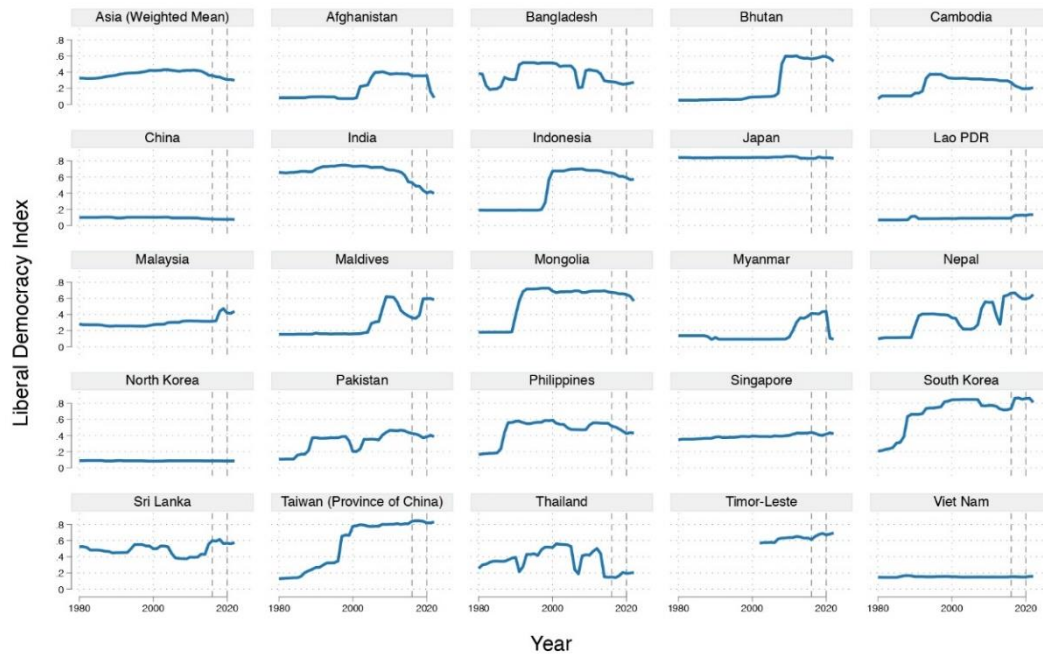
President Trump is famously hard to predict. In addition to an erratic policy agenda that swings wildly by the day, and which is often conducted through social media blasts, his approach to foreign policymaking is marked by bravado, exaggeration, and misdirection. One of President Trump's assets as a politician is his ability to confuse his audience, who can never truly know if he means what he says. How serious is President Trump's desire to purchase Greenland from Denmark (Marshall 2025): is it a negotiating tactic, a distraction from difficult congressional hearings on his cabinet appointments, or just a passing thought that is easily shared via Truth Social and eagerly reshared by engagement-hungry news organizations? Rather than take President Trump at his word, the best way to anticipate the effects of his administration on democracy in Asia is to consider what we know about his actions during his previous tenure, and then to examine potential differences the second time around.

The Record of Democracy in Asia Over the Past Four Decades

As a first step to understanding the effect that the second Trump administration will have on Asian democracy, it is imperative to undertake a comprehensive review of the record of democracy in Asia over the past four decades. Figure 1 uses data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project to illustrate the status of democracy across the region between 1980 and 2022, the last year for which data are currently available. Each plot shows trends in democracy based on V-Dem's liberal democracy index, a composite index that integrates expert information from independent coders on the extent to which each country's political regime meets a basic definition of liberal democracy. The first plot on

the upper left-hand side of the figure shows the weighted average of democracy scores for all countries in the figure, providing a summary index of trends in democracy across Asia that reflects differences in population across states in the region.

Figure 1. Democracy in Asia, 1980-2022



Vertical lines denote the first Trump administration (2017-2020). Source: V-Dem. Graphs by author, regional mean weighted by population.

The data reveal a discernible trend: on the whole, Asia is experiencing a period of democratic backsliding that dates to the mid-2010s. Individual country experiences vary, with generally positive signs for democracy in South Korea and Taiwan, small but meaningful improvements in Malaysia and Sri Lanka. However, these indicators of democratic progress are overwhelmed by the steep decline in liberal democracy in India, as well as the democratic erosion observed in Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Additionally, China, Pakistan, and Vietnam remain firmly authoritarian, with no meaningful change in their level of democracy under President Trump. Even Myanmar—a regional bright spot from 2015-2020—has suffered a staggering setback after a tentative but meaningful political liberalization measure last decade. Japan, the lone democratic stalwart in the region, is the only country in Asia to have maintained a consistently high level of liberal democracy since 1980. It is unlikely that President Trump’s behavior in office during his first term (January 2017-January 2021) is responsible for these patterns. Democratic erosion across the region began prior to Trump’s election in November 2016 and continued under the subsequent administration of President Joe Biden. The two most significant recent coups in Thailand (2014) and Myanmar (2021) occurred during Democratic administrations in the U.S. These observations do not imply that the Biden administration is responsible for the democratic setbacks that Asia has recently faced. However, it does remind us that most of what shapes the fate of Asian democracies is domestic in nature, driven by internal political divides and ongoing political developments within Asian states. Whereas Cold War politics created a direct incentive for the United States and other Western powers to intervene in the domestic politics of Asian states, such direct intervention is much less common in the contemporary era.

The transactional nature of President Trump's first administration foreign policy meant that he, like other U.S. presidents in the post-Cold War world era, worked with democratic and nondemocratic states alike in Asia. His memorable summits with Kim Jong Un were moments of great fanfare, but with little political consequence. His very public anti-Chinese rhetoric included almost no concern whatsoever for anything related to the domestic political conditions within China. Many have noticed the parallels in the personal styles of President Trump and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, but this did not lead to closer relations between the U.S. and the Philippines—in fact, Duterte's rhetoric was more open to China than had been his predecessors. The military regime in Thailand, another U.S. treaty ally, was given wide berth by the Trump administration, which continued the longstanding U.S. practice of seeing Thailand as a bulwark against a rising China. With the benefit of hindsight, and President Trump's personal style notwithstanding, we can understand his first administration's foreign policy as essentially a Trumpian articulation of classical realism. It is statist in orientation, uninterested in the domestic political arrangements of foreign countries, and directed by President Trump's understanding of the U.S. national interest in a competitive world.

Trump's Indifference to Democracy: A Cause for Optimism?

Having established that the first Trump administration exhibited a marked indifference to democracy, both in Asia and elsewhere, we are now in a position to consider how the second Trump administration's foreign policy will shape democracy in Asia. If predictions are to be made based on the previous administration, the signs are cautiously optimistic. Notwithstanding Trump's personal fondness for authoritarian strongmen, his next administration appears unlikely to take measures that will directly encourage further autocratization across the region. A case in point is Indonesia, a strategically valuable nonaligned regional power with ambitions to be the Maritime Axis of the Asia-Pacific region (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia 2021). The past decade has seen former president Joko Widodo and his newly elected successor, Prabowo Subianto, taking clear steps to undermine the country's constitutional order and the rule of law. The next Trump administration will almost certainly not have any direct influence in either supporting or opposing these developments as they continue over the next four years. Prabowo may—like Duterte—share some personal affinity to a politician like Trump, but on a policy level, each leader's national interests will dominate any ideological or pragmatic battles over either country's internal politics.

These are reassuring signals about the future of Asian democracy under the second Trump administration, not because President Trump is any defender of democracy, but because he is altogether indifferent to it. This gives Asian states room to chart their own courses. Most likely, democracy in Asia will be driven by the choices of Asian politicians and their countries' mass publics, not by U.S. foreign policy priorities and interests. If there is any exception to the predicted indifference of the second Trump administration to Asian democracy, it is on the Korean peninsula. The recent declaration of martial law by President Yoon Suk Yeol, accompanied by the ongoing political and constitutional saga in the aftermath, was a serious crisis affecting a close U.S. ally (Choe and Livni 2024). The outcome matters for U.S. foreign policy because of the partisan differences within South Korea regarding the most effective approach to confronting the North. It is risky to make any concrete predictions about politics on the Korean peninsula in the coming four years. However, this is the Asian context in which the second Trump administration might have clear preferences for one party over another. If security

conditions were to deteriorate on the peninsula, the Trump administration may prioritize U.S. foreign policy interests over the rule of law and democratic stability in South Korea.

Project 2025's Indirect Effects on Global Democracy

Even if the U.S. is more reluctant to intervene directly in the domestic politics of Asian states, policies such as sanctions and efforts to promote democracy can still affect global democracy. For decades, the U.S. has promoted global democracy indirectly by supporting electoral reforms and strengthening civil society. While these efforts may not lead to a fundamental shift in the political landscape of any country, they can contribute to the strengthening of democratic institutions and processes. By supporting civil society and actors who strive for rights and freedoms, these efforts can also support nascent democratic movements in otherwise closed political systems.

Notwithstanding this history, Asia's democrats should be apprehensive about what the next four years will bring from Washington. That is because relative to the first Trump administration, the second Trump administration has adopted a distinctly more explicit policy agenda, summarized in Project 2025 (project2025.org). During President Trump's 2016 electoral campaign, the Republican Party famously refused to even announce a platform. The subsequent administration was disorganized and often ineffective. Not so the second time around. Project 2025 is a blueprint for how the next administration will govern, and its subtitle "Presidential Transition Project" indicates its authors' understanding that the second Trump administration should have the purpose and direction that his first administration lacked.

In terms of foreign policy, Project 2025 espouses a model of the president as a statesman whose agenda embodies the country's national interests. The foreign policy bureaucracy is tasked with implementing this vision. Project 2025 sees the U.S. State Department as an obstacle to Trump's agenda and finds other parts of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, such as the U.S. Agency for Global Media, as misguided, wasteful, and inconsistent with U.S. national interests.

There is no space for democracy promotion in Project 2025. Democracy is invoked as an American value only sparingly, and mostly in cases where the fight for freedom and democracy can be a cudgel against an adversarial regime like Iran or Venezuela. Democracy in Asia is entirely absent from Project 2025's blueprint for U.S. foreign policy. Agencies like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) are directed to prioritize national security interests, which mostly means containing China rather than supporting civil liberties and individual freedoms. Project 2025 specifically identifies the Bureau for Democracy, Development, and Innovation as pivotal for USAID's reorientation around "trade, economic growth, innovation, partnerships with the private sector, and the agency's relationship with communities of faith." (Primorac 2025) There is no mention of democracy as an American value, nor as a strategic interest.

This is the primary lesson to be drawn for the future of Asian democracy under the second Trump administration. Again, with caveat that prediction remains especially difficult in these times, a second Trump administration bodes ill for democracy in Asia because it reveals the fragility and contingency of the United States' commitment to democracy and the rule of law. As Hal Brands wrote in 2017, Trump "has argued that America lacks the competence to promote democracy abroad, and framed values-based priorities as distractions from the real business of advancing U.S. security and prosperity" (Brands 2017). In 2025, he will be bolstered by an administration that is better able to

implement his vision. Even if President Trump is correct that the U.S. is bad a democracy promotion, the symbolic value of the U.S. as a champion of global democracy is substantial, and the U.S. has a history of providing financial, organizational, and educational values support for democrats in Asia and around the world. Defenders of Asian democracy will be losing a major global supporter when President Trump returns to office. In these troubled times, it will fall to them to preserve the shared democratic values that transcend partisanship and national security in the world's most important region.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, democracy in Asia is likely to face a difficult four years. President Trump is no ally of global democracy but concerns that his next administration will seek to actively undermine democracy around the world are probably overblown. The Asia policy under the first Trump administration was characteristically transactional in nature, marked by indifference to the domestic political conditions throughout the region. His next administration promises more of the same, but with a more explicit commitment to President Trump's vision of American national interests, which do not include democracy in Asia. This should serve as a sobering reminder to Asia's democrats of the mercurial nature of U.S. foreign policy and the necessity of careful planning to fight for democracy and the rule of law within the region. ■

References

- Brands, Hal. 2017. "The Unexceptional Superpower: American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump." *Survival* 59, 6: 7-40.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00396338.2017.1399722> (Accessed January 16, 2025)
- Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia. 2021. "Indonesia Has Enormous Potential to Become Global Maritime Axis, President Jokowi Says." September 23.
<https://setkab.go.id/en/indonesia-has-enormous-potential-to-become-global-maritime-axis-president-jokowi-says/> (Accessed January 16, 2025)
- Choe, Sang-Hun, and Ephrat Livni. 2024. "Who Is Yoon Suk Yeol, South Korea's Leader?" *The New York Times*. December 3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/03/world/asia/yoon-suk-yeol-south-korea-president.html> (Accessed January 16, 2025)
- Marshall, Josh. 2025. "Greenland, Panama, Canada ... None of that is Going to Happen." *Talking Points Memo*. January 9. <https://talkingpointsmemo.com/edblogger/greenland-panama-canada-none-of-that-is-going-to-happen> (Accessed January 16, 2025)
- Primorac, Max. 2023. "Agency for International Development." In *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, eds. Paul Dans and Steven Groves. Washington D.C.: The Heritage Foundation. https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-09.pdf (Accessed January 16, 2025)

- **Thomas B. Pepinsky** is the Walter F. LaFeber Professor of Government and Public Policy at Cornell University and a Nonresident Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy Program at the Brookings Institution.

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

This program was funded in part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

“Democracy in Asia under the New Trump Administration”

979-11-6617-855-9 95340

Date of Issue: 20 January 2025

Edited by Hansu Park

For inquiries:

Hansu Park, Research Associate

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 204) hspark@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
1 Sajik-ro 7-gil, Jongno-gu, Seoul 03028, Republic of Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1684
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr