

## Sunnylands Initiative Seoul Joint Statement

Participants of the Sunnylands Initiative from Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, Samoa, Thailand, and the United States, gathered in Seoul on February 1-2, 2024, to take stock of the developments since the Sydney meeting where they reaffirmed their commitment to the [Sunnylands Principles](#) on Enhancing Democratic Partnership in the Indo-Pacific Region, and supported the Republic of Korea's leading role in organizing the Third Summit for Democracy. Under the Yoon Seok-yeol administration, the Republic of Korea hosted the second Indo-Pacific Regional Summit for Democracy and is preparing to host both the global and regional Summit for Democracy in March 2024. The participants of the Sunnylands Initiative have convened in Seoul to highlight the Republic of Korea's growing role in democratic leadership and to build upon the momentum of the Initiative to support democratic governance beyond the Summit.

### The State of Democracy in the Indo-Pacific

The Sunnylands Seoul Convening and the subsequent Third Summit for Democracy come at a crucial moment for democracy globally. Since identifying priority areas and re-affirming our commitment to upholding democratic principles at the April 2023 convening in Sydney, the assault on democratic values around the globe continues unabated, exacerbated by economic instability and injustice that undermine democratic resilience and erode the social fabric of democracy. While the growing threats to democracy underscore the importance of our efforts, we explore new avenues for regional partnership and update our work to remain relevant in a continuously evolving regional context.

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's 2023 report notes that general negative trends in democracy in the Indo-Pacific have stabilized in most cases. However, the report also stresses that the cessation of broad downward trends should not be mistaken for early signs of a democratic resurgence or indicative of new openings in the region. Data from the Freedom House's *Freedom in the World Report* confirms these findings – since 2021, total scores across all democratic indicators and country statuses in the Indo-Pacific have remained relatively constant. However, the majority of Indo-Pacific countries remain either not free or partially free. At this Seoul Convening, we recognize that the people of North Korea are still suffering from a totalitarian rule.

Though trends have stabilized in most cases, several localities have experienced sharp deteriorations in freedom. Hong Kong has significantly rolled back on freedom and rights after the passage of the National Security Law, its independent media landscape stands on its last leg, and transnational repression remains rife in exile communities. In Myanmar, as the resistance

forces gain ground despite the military junta's unrelenting atrocities against civilians, pro-democracy support is imperative to tip the balance irreversibly against the military dictatorship.

## New Opportunities for the Indo-Pacific

Despite the bleak picture, 2024 offers key opportunities to engage regional partners in support of democratic norms and values, and for democracies to work in common cause and set a positive example for the Indo-Pacific. It is crucial that we redouble our efforts and respond to developments in 2024 as our initiatives over the next year will help set a foundation for the support of democratic norms and values in the Indo-Pacific moving forward.

Thailand's 2023 election fostered a vigorous youth democratic movement which assisted in the reformist Move Forward Party's broad success at the ballot box. Although the Move Forward Party faced major setbacks in establishing a coalition government, 2024 presents an opportunity for Thailand's pro-democracy movement and diverse voices from across the country to increase civic participation as the military-appointed senate's voting rights expire in 2024.

In January 2024, Taiwan held free and fair presidential elections. The Taiwanese people selected William Lai Ching-te by a comfortable margin despite targeted, PRC-sponsored disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting President-Elect Lai and the integrity of the elections. Although Taiwan's 2024 election demonstrated the strength of Taiwanese institutions, it also clearly highlighted the persistent risk of foreign election interference to undermine its hard-won democracy.

Indonesia and the Republic of Korea will hold elections in 2024, providing both countries with opportunities to set a strong example for their neighbors to continue their support for democratic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Established democracies have also increased their support for democratic values across the region: Japan has provided a crucial link between the Indo-Pacific and the G7's democratic agenda. Its development of domestic fact-checking mechanisms and creation of concrete action plans assist in promoting international cooperation against disinformation and data privacy abuse within the G7 framework. Drawing attention to the diverse threats to democracy that emanate from social, economic, technological disruptions due to the profound impact of pandemics, climate change, demographic change and emerging technologies, participants shared the needs for continued exchange of views on how to address them.

The Pacific Island countries, which have remained relatively free and open between 2021 and 2023 according to Freedom House metrics, are in the process of making democracy their own. Their efforts provide an opportunity for established democracies to foster democratic solidarity and demonstrate a strong commitment to a shared set of norms and values. The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and the Biketawa Declaration by the Pacific Islands Forum outline the collective vision of Pacific Island countries for a coordinated regional effort to uphold common democratic values.

By focusing our efforts on the spaces that exist and remaining ever vigilant for new democratic openings, we can work to make a free and open Indo-Pacific a reality.

## The Sunnylands Initiative Action Plans

Recognizing that democracy is not a destination but a process, the participants gathered in Seoul to build upon the strong foundation set in the previous meetings. They discussed developments in the three areas identified in the prior convening—Partnering for Democracy, Democracy Advocates at Risk, Anti-Corruption, and Technology and Democracy—to determine firm actions items with respect to the future of Indo-Pacific democratic solidarity and formulate a coherent strategy moving forward.

As espoused in the Sydney Statement, cultivating strong democratic partnerships throughout the Indo-Pacific remains a key tenet of the Sunnylands Initiative’s efforts. As countries across the region hold elections in 2024 and the Pacific Island countries wrestle with what democracy means to them as a bloc, partnerships with established Indo-Pacific democracies, civil society organizations, and regional multilaterals are crucial in building a sense of solidarity and fostering respect of diverse perspectives on democratic norms and values.

Given that safeguarding Democracy Advocates at Risk (DAR), who are integral to democratic development, and maintaining their advocacy work remains a challenge in the region, we committed at the Sydney convening to support regional initiatives that provide refuge and fellowship, as well as operational and programmatic support to DARs. Building on this at the Seoul Convening, participants agreed to launch a regional framework for DARs.

Participants also discussed the ongoing efforts to combat corruption, bribery, and cross-border kleptocracy. They reiterated the importance of the Republic of Korea’s leadership on regional anti-corruption efforts, stressing the importance of advancing financial integrity and transparency while bolstering whole-of-government anti-corruption capabilities.

Participants also discussed ongoing efforts to identify the opportunities as well as threats to democracy presented by emerging technologies. Participants discussed the ways in which governments, civil society, and the private sector in the Indo-Pacific should contribute to developing governance frameworks for AI; protect internet freedom, safety, and information integrity; and uphold universal human rights online. The ROK government will take up this important theme in the third Summit for Democracy and the AI Safety Summit, to be held in March and May 2024 respectively. The ROK government can demonstrate leadership as Indo-Pacific countries develop democratic governance models for new technology.

## Recommendations to the ROK Government

Over the past couple of decades, the Republic of Korea (ROK) has emerged as one of the world's most vibrant democracies. The ROK is an exceptional country that has achieved both an economic miracle and democratic transformation. However, compared to its successful economic turnaround, the ROK's democratization experience has garnered less attention from the international community. The ROK's turbulent modern history, marked by colonialization, the Korean War, and authoritarian rule, has nonetheless culminated in the establishment of a resilient democracy with robust citizen participation. Today, the ROK is a member of the D10 and embraces democracy collaboration as a key tenet of its global contributions. Building on the momentum of ROK's growing democratic leadership, we make the following proposals.

### *Establishment of a Korean democracy support institution that engages globally*

We recommend that the ROK establish a non-partisan, independent institution that provides financial and technical support for democratic governance in the region and beyond. As an Asian democracy, the ROK's homegrown experience in democratization as well as its track record in electoral integrity, judicial independence, and anti-corruption measures serve as valuable assets for consultation and support.

### *Diversification of ODA to support democracy*

We recommend that the ROK explore pathways to allocate a portion of its ODA, either independently or in collaboration with other democratic donors, directly to civil society organizations working for democratization. In 2022, the ROK was the sixteenth largest donor among OECD Development Assistance Committee members. While the Yoon Administration has substantially increased the entire volume of ODA as well as its grants allocation, it essentially remains a bilateral, government-to-government assistance mechanism with limited capacity for direct allocations to civil society organizations in recipient countries.

### *Formation of a democracy coalition in the region*

We recommend that the ROK take a leadership role in forming a network of like-minded countries that cherish democratic norms, values and principles and are interested in collaborating with others in their struggle for democracy. Although democratic countries in the region are making an effort to support nascent democracies, initiatives are often too fragmented to make an appreciable impact. The ROK is uniquely positioned to take a leading role given the broad trust it has received across the Indo-Pacific.

## About the Sunnylands Initiative

The Sunnylands Initiative was established in January 2020 to advance a vision for cooperation on strengthening democratic governance in the Indo-Pacific region. Recognizing the absence of regional infrastructure to defend freedom, human rights, democratic resilience, and the rule of law, leaders from the region have gathered in Anaheim, CA, Odawara, Japan, and Sydney, Australia, with the firm belief that sustained support of democratic norms and values is crucial to a robust and stable rules-based international order.