

**DEMOCRATIC VALUES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC IN
AN ERA OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE PACIFIC, CENTRAL
ASIA, AND NONPROLIFERATION

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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DEMOCRATIC VALUES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC IN AN ERA OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION

Wednesday, June 9, 2021

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE PACIFIC,
CENTRAL ASIA, AND NONPROLIFERATION
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 11:06 a.m., via Webex, Hon. Ami Bera (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. BERA. Banging the virtual gavel. The Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation will come to order.

Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any point.

And all members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record subject to the length limitations in the rules. To insert something into the record, please have your staff email the previously mentioned address or contact full committee staff.

Please keep your video function on at all times, even when you are not recognized by the chair.

Members are responsible for muting and unmuting themselves. And please remember to mute yourself after you finish speaking. Consistent with remote committee proceedings of H. Res. 8, staff will only mute members and witnesses as appropriate when they are not under recognition to eliminate background noise.

I see that we have a forum and will now recognize myself for opening remarks.

I want to thank my good friend, the ranking member, Mr. Chabot, the members of this subcommittee, and our witnesses and members of the public for joining us at today's hearing focused on the important role of liberal norms and values in U.S. foreign policy toward the Indo-Pacific.

I have been very troubled by the democratic backsliding in countries across the world. According to the annual Freedom House, Freedom of the World Report, 2020 saw the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. Unfortunately, some of the most significant declines were in our region in Asia.

Having traveled, pre-pandemic to the region in 2019 and early 2020 to both Sri Lanka, Nepal, Malaysia, I was struck by the struggles some of these young democracies were experiencing, as well as the increasing challenge authoritarianism poses for fledgling democratic institutions. Civil society organizations, journalists, and human rights activists are routinely targeted for supporting liberal norms and principals.

We also saw some countries in the region introduce and adopt legislation that discriminates against ethnic minority populations and undermines the country's secular identity and commitment to pluralism. These worrying trends regrettably intensified with the spread of COVID-19, during which we saw some governments further back down on freedoms of the press and expression in efforts to silence criticism or otherwise exploit the health crisis to fortify their power over the opposition.

From the genocide of leaders in Xinjiang to the military coup in Burma to the political crisis in Samoa, it is clear U.S. engagement with this consequential region must also grapple with the ongoing challenges to democratic norms and values.

I applaud the Biden Administration for the work it has done thus far to restore values at the center of U.S. foreign policy, such as working with allies and partners to impose sanctions on Chinese officials for their human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and to promote cooperation on Taiwan, as well as issuing the National Security Study Memorandum in combatting corruption.

I fully agree with President Biden's February speech on America's place in the world that American leadership must meet this new moment of advancing authoritarianism. To do that, we must work to strengthen our democratic institutions at home as we continue to support human rights, democracy, and freedoms internationally. U.S. partners and adversaries alike need to know that our commitment to these liberal norms is not a bargaining chip, and that commitment will not change just because a strategic competition is afoot.

That is why I am particularly pleased to have our witnesses today, who will help us better understand the Biden Administration's strategy for pushing back authoritarianism and the role that democratic values play in our approach. Questions like, how should the United States better help struggling democracies in the face of spreading authoritarianism? In particular, how can the United States better support the next generation of young people often seen driving the necessary political changes as we have seen with the protests in Hong Kong and Thailand, and the civil disobedience movement in Burma? How should we hold our adversaries and allies alike accountable for undermining democratic norms and values? How can we better message our approach in our unique strengths when U.S. adversaries are playing by a different rule book that attempts to undermine the liberal world order?

I look forward to our witnesses' testimony in today's hearing, and now will yield 5 minutes to my friend from Ohio, our ranking member, Representative Steve Chabot, for his opening comments.

Mr. CHABOT. I want to thank Chairman Bera for holding this important hearing today. And I would also like to thank our panel of witnesses for providing their insight on how the Biden Administration intends to protect democratic values and advance human rights and the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific in an era of strategic competition.

In the 25 years that I served in Congress and on the Foreign Affairs Committee, I have always tried to make the promotion of human rights a top priority. During that time, we have witnessed multiple countries in the Indo-Pacific transitioning toward democ-

racy. We have also seen democratic backsliding, as the chairman mentioned, often at the hands of violent authoritarians with the tacit or explicit support of those who wish to see democracy fail.

Today, however, our support for democratic values in the region takes place against the backdrop of great power competition that is really an ideological rivalry between two competing value systems: that of the United States and our fellow democracies and that of the Chinese Communist Party.

At home, Beijing has shown a blatant disregard for human rights and the rule of law, whether it is their dismantling of democratic institutions in Hong Kong or they are committing genocide against Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in China.

Abroad, the CCP's efforts to undermine trust in democratic institutions and use political and economic pressure to promote their form of authoritarian government are totally at odds with our values. For instance, we know that the parties most fervent desire is to extinguish the light of democracy in Taiwan. And Beijing is attempting to test the strength of other fledgling democracies across the globe through corruption, disinformation, ruthlessly aggressive economic practices, and foreign interference in democratic processes.

Make no mistake, the CCP will continue to subvert freedom and democracy in the Indo-Pacific and beyond until either it does or it does not reach its goal of regional and, ultimately, global hegemony.

In this era of strategic competition and in the wake of a global pandemic, it is crucial that the United States remain actively engaged in the Indo-Pacific to strengthen democratic institutions and provide countries with a model of governance that protects the rights of its people and promotes transparency and accountability.

Finding the right approach to addressing human rights' abuses while competing with the PRC, however, is critically important. We do not want to push countries into the PRC's arms, nor can we sacrifice our values. It is this administration's task, therefore, to advance both our interests and our values without compromising either.

That said, now is not the time to tread lightly. Doing so would put vulnerable countries at greater risk. In particular, I would like to highlight Cambodian and Burma, which—Cambodia and Burma, which have witnessed alarming democratic backsliding in recent years.

As co-chairman of the congressional Cambodia Caucus, along with my Democratic colleague, Alan Lowenthal, we have consistently denounced Prime Minister Hun Sen's increasingly repressive campaign to stamp out democracy in Cambodia, and will continue to do so. Human rights and the protection of fundamental democratic freedoms are integral to our bilateral relationship. So far, international condemnation of visa sanctions have not compelled Hun Sen to respect the rule of law, and so we must do much more in Cambodia.

And I want to commend Congressman Lowenthal for his determination in this area. And it has been a pleasure to work with him.

In Burma, we have witnessed the disintegration of democracy in real time. On February 1, the Burmese military seized control and detained top political leaders. Since then, several hundred innocent people have been callously murdered and thousands more have been arbitrarily detained, including Americans. This brutal coup is a blatant violation of the rights of the Burmese people who, to their credit, have been courageously and peacefully protesting these heinous crimes.

These recent events only add to the atrocities carried out by the Burmese military against the Rohingya, which have left over a million people displaced. We must continue to stand with the people of Burma in their struggle for democracy. That is why Congressman Levin and I sponsored a resolution condemning Burma's military for their assault against democracy, and why I sponsored a resolution in 2018 that called the atrocities against the Rohingya what they were, genocide. Both resolutions passed the House with overwhelming bipartisan support, demonstrating our commitment to human rights in Burma.

While there is still much work to be done in the Indo-Pacific to protect and promote freedom, the rule of law, I still believe democracy will prevail. I look forward to hearing from our panel of witnesses on how the Biden Administration intends to achieve these important goals.

Thank you for holding this hearing, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

Mr. BERA. Thank you to the ranking member, Mr. Chabot.

Let me now introduce our witnesses. We have Mr. Scott Busby, the acting principal deputy assistant secretary for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. Mr. Dean Thompson is the acting assistant secretary for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. Mr. Francisco Bencosme is the senior advisor to the acting assistant secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Bureau. And last is Mr. Craig Hart, the acting senior deputy assistant administrator for East Asia and the Pacific for USAID.

I thank all the witnesses for being here today, and will now recognize each witness for 5 minutes. Without objection, your prepared written statements will be made part of the record.

I will now invite Mr. Busby for his testimony.

STATEMENT OF SCOTT BUSBY, ACTING PRINCIPAL DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND LABOR

Mr. BUSBY. Thank you, Mr. Chair and Ranking Member Chabot and the others of the committee who are here today. We appreciate the opportunity you have given me and my colleagues to appear before you today to testify on the very important and timely issue of democratic values in the Indo-Pacific region in an era of strategic competition.

I would also like to thank the committee for its continued leadership in advancing U.S. values and interests and supporting our engagement in this region.

The administration is committed to putting democratic values at the center of U.S. foreign policy because doing so holds the key to achieving our interest. The United States recognizes that our own

prosperity and security are inextricably tied to the Indo-Pacific region, and so the region is a leading U.S. foreign policy priority. We seek to maintain strong ties with the peoples of the region by amplifying the role of civil society in protecting and promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms, including through our innovative democracy and human rights programming.

While democracy expanded across the Indo-Pacific after the cold war, more recently we have seen backsliding. Some governments have sought to increase control over their populations, triggering an erosion of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and democratic processes

[inaudible].

In addition, the Indo-Pacific region is increasingly troubled by provocations, economic coercion, authoritarianism, and malign influence. 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 to the spread of propaganda and disinformation and silencing critical voices. Disinformation has profoundly changed how people vote, obtain healthcare, 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.

The PRC government is increasingly pressuring nations throughout the region to subordinate their freedom and autonomy to a quote, “common destiny,” close quote, under a PRCsphere of influence.

Beijing has invested heavily in efforts to degrade U.S. strengths and prevent us from promoting and defending our values and our interests and upholding the international rules-based order. The PRC continues to refine its brand of techno-authoritarianism and deploys and proliferates technologies, both old and new, to this end. We continue to support the PRC’s neighbors and commercial partners in defending their rights and autonomy.

To address these challenges, democratic partners and allies remain an important strategic asset, and expanding our engagement with them is central to achieving our human rights and democratic governance goals in the Indo-Pacific. This was evidenced by the President’s decision to hold his first bilateral summit meetings with Japan and the Republic of Korea, where our joint commitments to democracy, good governance, and human rights were reinforced.

We are also increasing our engagement through the Quad, ASEAN, the Pacific Islands Forum, and, of course, the United Nations.

Our early reengagement with the U.N. Human Rights Council

[inaudible] Recently rejoining the Council’s core group on Sri Lanka and helping to advance the Sri Lanka and Burma resolutions demonstrates our renewed commitment to joint action.

We have also increased our coordination with like-minded allies in imposing costs on those responsible for human rights abuses and undermining democratic values in the region. This is reflected in the sanctions we and others have imposed on senior Burmese mili-

tary officials responsible for the coup and the entities that support them, as well as the parallel sanctions implemented on March 22 by the U.S., EU, U.K., and Canada against PRC officials and entities responsible for the egregious human rights violations in Xinjiang.

In an effort to buttress democratic governance globally, President Biden has committed to convening a global summit for democracy to ensure broad cooperation among allies and partners on the values we hold most dear. The summit will be an acknowledgment that all countries have different challenges on the path of democratization, and we all, including the United States, must institute reforms and recommit ourselves to these universal values.

From the PRC's genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang, dismantling of Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy, to recent backsliding on democratic governance in Sri Lanka, the military coup in Burma, and the ongoing pervasive repression in North Korea, we are grappling with a wide array of human rights challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. We describe with greater specificity in our testimonies these challenges and how we are seeking to address them.

Mr. Chair, promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific region is not just the right thing to do, it also advances our strategic interests by building more stable and a prosperous society. 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 we hope will last for generations.

With continued U.S. engagement, backed by congressional support, we will continue to emphasize that the promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law benefit the Indo-Pacific region. We will continue to consult closely with you on our path forward and are pleased to answer any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Busby follows:]

Scott Busby, Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State

Testimony Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation
Washington, D.C., June 9, 2021

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.

Mr. BERA. Thank you, Mr. Busby.
I now invite Mr. Thompson to give his testimony.

STATEMENT OF DEAN THOMPSON, ACTING ASSISTANT SECRETARY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, BUREAU OF SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS

Mr. THOMPSON. Thank you, Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Chabot, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify on democratic values in the Indo-Pacific in an era of strategic competition. I am honored to be here today alongside my colleagues.

From the world's largest democracy in India to one of its smallest in Maldives, the democratic tradition remains strong in South Asia. That said, homegrown challenges centered around constraints to freedom of expression, association, and religion threaten those traditions. A threat that is compounded by the malign influence of governments such as China and Russia. This makes the work we do to bolster these governments and citizens' abilities to recognize and combat this malign influence that much more important.

Sri Lanka is Asia's oldest democracy, and its elections are largely free, fair, and nonviolent, despite a troubled history. While we have pledged to work with Sri Lanka's democratically elected leaders, we take seriously the challenges posed by the increased militarization of government functions and diminished space for civil society.

Nepal is a young Federal democratic republic that has made admirable progress in its democratic journey. Observers have characterized elections as generally well-conducted. At the same time, President Bhandari dissolved parliament for the second time in 5 months on May 22. While the past year has seen continuous political inflating, it has remained within the confines of the law and disputes have been settled through the course.

Bhutan is a democratic success story in South Asia. It has helped three elections since its King abdicated absolute power in 2008. The most recent election in 2018 was widely viewed as free and fair, and the reins of government passed peacefully from one political party to another.

In Maldives, we have seen a clear expression of the Maldivian people's commitment to democracy with nearly 90 percent of eligible voters casting ballots in the 2018 Presidential election.

India remains the world's largest democracy with a strong rule of law and independent judiciary and enjoys a strong and growing strategic partnership with the United States. However, some of the Indian Government's actions have raised concerns and are inconsistent with India's democratic values. This includes increasing restriction on freedom of expression and the detention of human rights activists and journalists. The United States regularly engages India on these issues, including the important work of civil society.

As is the case around the world, the PRC government uses a combination of economic levers and soft power to pressure South Asian countries to align with its interests, and smaller countries are especially vulnerable to this pressure.

Common issues among South Asian countries include strong ties between local political elites and PRC economic interests, wide-

spread political and economic corruption, and a lack of ready alternatives to PRC financing, creating a climate of dependency. These conditions limit the flexibility and independence of many countries in their bilateral relationship with the PRC and can weaken their institutions and rule of law.

To assist these countries in facing these challenges, the United States employs a number of strategic programs aimed at helping them increase their national resilience by strengthening their core democratic values. In Fiscal Year 2020, State and USAID bilateral assistance for democracy to South Asia totaled almost \$69 million or 14 percent of our South Asia total.

In Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, SCA supports these objectives through the \$14 million South Asia Governance Fund, our small grants program run in partnership with the Asia Foundation. Projects supported by this fund seek to strengthen civic participation and democratic norms, enable citizen access to credible information, build trust and participatory governance, and increase communities' resilience to foreign and malign influence and corruption.

Public diplomacy plays an outside role in supporting and strengthening efforts to mitigate malign influence. Every speaker program, American space event, cultural collaboration, media interviews, social media posts, or exchange program is part of a sustained long-term campaign to build core democratic values, empower local voices, and build networks that can challenge foreign malign influence.

Mr. Chairman, thank you, and the other members of this committee, for your continued support of these vital efforts. Our ability to invest our time and resources on these critical issues in South Asia remains in our national interest. Our support for democratic values and human rights helps build a more free and open Indo-Pacific region, enhances good governance, improving security and facilitating human development.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Thompson follows:]

STATEMENT OF DEAN THOMPSON, ACTING ASSISTANT SECRETARY, BUREAU OF SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS, BEFORE THE HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Chabot, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for inviting me to testify on democratic values in the Indo-Pacific in an era of strategic competition with the PRC and Russia. I am honored to be here today alongside my State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development colleagues to discuss this critical issue.

South Asia is a cornerstone of the U.S. vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific. From the world's largest democracy in India to one of its smallest in Maldives, the democratic tradition remains strong in South Asia. Nevertheless, a number of challenges – including corruption, intimidation of journalists and civil society organizations, and the lure of “quick and easy” authoritarian solutions to problems such as the COVID-19 pandemic – continue to threaten those traditions. The threat is compounded by the harmful influence of governments such as China and Russia, making the work we do to bolster these governments' and citizens' ability to recognize and combat this malign influence that much more important.

The ability of governments to uphold the basic democratic values that enable democracy and the rule of law is an essential component to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region. Our goal continues to be working with our partners inside and outside government to maintain and strengthen those values as well as to cement gains in human rights and religious freedom.

Sri Lanka

In Asia's oldest democracy, Sri Lankan elections are largely free and fair, and non-violent, despite its troubled history. While the COVID-19 pandemic limited international monitoring, domestic observers judged presidential and parliamentary elections held in 2019 and 2020 to be free and fair, as well as peaceful and well-managed.

While we have pledged to work with Sri Lanka's democratically elected leaders, we take seriously the challenges posed by the increased militarization of government functions and diminished space for civil society. In October 2020, President Rajapaksa used his coalition's supermajority in parliament to pass a constitutional amendment that consolidated power in the executive and reinstated most of the president's constitutional powers that had been abolished in 2015.

Nepal

In Nepal, we are working with the government to advance its transition to federalism by building the capacity of the national and local governments to become more transparent and accountable.

Nepal is a young federal democratic republic, with the 2015 constitution establishing the current system of government. It has made some progress in its democratic journey, including by improving the lives of its citizens and protecting political rights, and observers have characterized elections as generally well-conducted. The past year has seen some contentious political infighting, though it remained within the confines of the law and disputes have been

settled through the courts. President Bhandari dissolved Parliament for the second time in five months on May 22 after Prime Minister Oli failed a vote of confidence. New elections are planned for November. We call on all parties to continue to resolve differences peacefully and through legal, constitutional, and electoral means.

Although Nepal has a recent history of a relatively free and open media, freedom of expression is not fully protected under the law. Some officials regularly threaten it with newly proposed laws restricting speech in some form, particularly with social media.

Bhutan

Bhutan is a democratic success story in South Asia. In 2018 Bhutan conducted its third democratic election since the Fourth King of Bhutan abdicated absolute power and paved the way for parliamentary elections in 2008. The 2018 election was widely viewed as free and fair, and the reins of government passed peacefully from one political party to another. Although we do not have formal diplomatic relations with Bhutan, we maintain warm, informal ties. Our investment in people-to-people exchanges has led to a robust relationship with their government, whose leadership consists of many alumni of U.S.-government funded International Visitor Leadership Programs and Humphrey Fellowships. In recent years we have expanded our cooperation with Bhutan through STEM programs, headed by USAID, NASA, and the State Department. We hope to build on this by beginning cooperation on clean city initiatives and combatting climate change with the only carbon negative country on the planet.

Maldives

The 2018 election of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih ushered in a new chapter in Maldivian history and placed the country on a clear upward trajectory on democratic governance and human rights metrics. With nearly 90 percent of the eligible population voting, this was a clear expression of the Maldivian people's commitment to democracy. The country voted for reform to reverse years of increasing corruption and authoritarian tendencies. We quickly mobilized support for President Solih's reform agenda after the election to help bolster the country's democratic institutions and good governance.

Following multiple delays caused by the pandemic, Maldives held free and fair local council elections in April 2021. These elections were particularly consequential as they were the first local elections held after 2019 legislative amendments that devolved fiscal and planning responsibilities to more than 200 island, city, and atoll councils. In addition, the introduction of a quota of 33 percent female representation on the councils helped lead to a record number of women candidates winning election. The United States is supporting Maldives' efforts to build stronger, more inclusive local governance, and we continue to support the country's broader work to strengthen democratic institutions and rule of law.

India

India remains the world's largest democracy with a strong rule of law and independent judiciary and enjoys a strong and growing strategic partnership with the United States. Its Constitution mandates a secular state that upholds the rights of all citizens to practice religion freely, freedom

of expression and speech, and equal treatment before the law. India has a long history of free and fair elections with members of all faith communities participating and holding office.

However, some of the Indian government's actions have raised significant concerns and are inconsistent with India's democratic values. CSOs and media sources have reported the growing use of sedition laws to restrict freedom of expression and justify the detention of human rights activists and journalists. We are concerned about obstacles to the important role of civil society, such as India's Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), which in some cases has hampered NGOs COVID-19 response efforts and has reportedly been used to constrain CSOs critical of the government, including Amnesty International India.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh serves as an example for many countries around the world, as it has made impressive strides in economic growth and poverty reduction. Bangladesh remains a key Indo-Pacific partner for the United States in maintaining regional stability, countering terrorism, expanding two-way trade, and expediting development, as well as in hosting more than 900,000 Rohingya refugees since 2017. We have emphasized that fully respecting civil and political rights and improving transparency and accountability will contribute directly to its aspirations for Least Developed Country (LDC) graduation and global competitiveness.

However, we remain concerned about respect for fundamental freedoms in Bangladesh and the country's democratic trajectory. We continue to believe it is critical for the Bangladesh government to allow civil society organizations and labor unions to operate; for individuals and groups to be able to express their views freely; and for political opposition to play its lawful role in a functioning democracy. Civil society is threatened by a shrinking space for activism and prohibitive draft regulations, and faces public criticism, including towards humanitarian workers responding to the Rohingya crisis. Journalists continue to self-censor for fear of the Digital Security Act, legislation introduced in 2018 to prosecute cybercrimes but also used as a legal instrument to effectively criminalize forms of nonviolent speech, both online and offline.

PRC Influence

Across the Indo-Pacific, the PRC government uses a combination of economic levers and soft power to pressure countries to align with its interests. Common issues among South Asian countries include strong ties between local political elites and PRC economic interests, widespread political and economic corruption, and a lack of ready alternatives to PRC financing, creating a climate of dependency. The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many SCA countries' already high debt burdens to PRC entities, and many countries are now looking to Beijing for assistance to revive their economies or avoid debt restructuring. These conditions limit the flexibility and independence of many countries in their bilateral relationships with the PRC, weaken their institutions and the rule of law, and increase support for PRC government priorities within international organizations. Nevertheless, in South Asia, while most countries seek to maintain positive relationships with the PRC, they actively seek to diversify their international relationships to avoid becoming too dependent on Beijing.

Fostering a Resilient Democratic Environment

Supporting Civil Society

SCA supports Indo-Pacific governance objectives in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka through the \$14 million South Asia Small Grants Program, run in partnership with The Asia Foundation. Projects seek to support civil society and independent media to strengthen civic participation and democratic principles, enable citizen access to credible information, build trust in participatory governance, and increase communities' resilience to foreign malign influence and corruption. The program aims to build local civil society capacity by professionalizing organizations, expanding the space for engagement, and building networks across countries to address common challenges.

These grants give us fresh eyes on the overall progress and challenges of sub-national governance to build participatory, inclusive governance. Grantees take on the projects most relevant to their communities. Some evaluate local government ability to deliver on services. Others assess budget transparency or build the messaging capacity of their local and provincial governments.

The program has allowed us to expand Embassy contacts, especially outside of capital cities. We have already learned a great deal about conditions on the ground from individual grantees. The program is proving to be an effective tool for creating new national and cross-border networks for civil society organizations. Throughout the pandemic, small organizations have supported each other professionally through the networking the program makes possible.

Civil society groups were quick to recognize the pandemic as a crisis in governance as well as in health. The South Asia Small Grants Program's flexibility allowed the bureau to quickly support civil society and the media's watchdog role in tracking local government responses to the pandemic. One group in Bangladesh closely scrutinizes the implementation of local stimulus packages for pandemic relief, and seeks to build their local government's institutional capacity, free from political patronage and vested interests, and inculcate the values of transparency and local stakeholder accountability. Another organization provides rapid response support of journalists and media workers during the pandemic, promoting freedom of expression, free flow of information, and safety and security for journalists. We fund grassroots organizations because we know that democratic progress will largely depend on their success.

Public Affairs programs in India utilize a variety of grants and programs to raise awareness and increase civil society support for issues such as women's empowerment, the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons, trafficking in persons (TIP) prevention, religious harmony and freedom, and press freedom. These programs target both established opinion leaders such as university faculty, civil society leaders, and government officials, as well as emerging voices such as students and social media influencers.

Public Outreach and Support for Media Freedom

Although foreign malign influence can take a variety of forms, as I've highlighted, Public Diplomacy supports and strengthens mitigation efforts across the spectrum of such corrupt, covert, and coercive activities. Many of our speaker programs, American Space event, cultural collaborations, media interviews, social media posts, and exchange programs are part of a

sustained, long-term campaign to build affinity with U.S. values, empower local voices, and build networks of influence that can challenge foreign malign influence on their own.

Public Affairs officers also work with local partners on programs specifically designed to help local media expose malign influence efforts. As an example, last fall Embassy Kathmandu recently worked with a local grantee on a program to train journalists in curbing mis- and disinformation, using thousands of news items as case studies for fact checking. Ambassador Randy Berry personally supported the program on Twitter, citing, “a commitment to fact-checking, an invigorated sense for preventing misinformation and the pledge to promote responsible journalism.” His posting garnered public support, including from the local grantee partner.

Our outreach efforts also focus on highlighting our positive and productive bilateral partnerships in the region and improving the understanding local populations have of U.S. assistance to their countries. In addition, U.S. Public Diplomacy programs are assisting to combat foreign malign influence by increasing the penetration of objective and accurate news stories; elevating public awareness about disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda, including through media literacy programs; promoting investigative journalism; and supporting the work of civil society and fact-checking organizations.

Advancing Gender Equity and Equality

In line with the Administration’s view, SCA has long recognized the value to democracy of advancing the Women, Peace and Security agenda and women’s economic empowerment. Women in civil society are an underutilized asset in advancing U.S. policy goals in the region, including in strengthening countries’ ability to protect their sovereignty; reducing regional tensions; and advancing inclusive solutions for supporting regional integration and more responsive governance. Throughout our programming and diplomatic engagements, the bureau also defends and promotes human rights and addresses discrimination and inequity, particularly for women and girls, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalized populations.

The bureau advances Women, Peace and Security through diplomatic engagement and programming supporting women’s access to meaningful political participation and leadership, including addressing the human security risks of climate change; enhancing the meaningful participation of women in ceasefire and peace negotiations, reconciliation, and political processes; promoting the prevention of gender-based violence through political accountability and more efficient judicial processes; promoting the development, implementation, and revision of partner countries’ National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security; and deepening our gender analyses and gender integration through increased reporting on the gender dimensions of core policy priorities while enhancing the integration of key findings into our policies. Recognizing that women’s leadership in security, politics, and the economy is key to inclusive security, economic growth, and stable democracies, SCA will continue to utilize U.S. participation in multilateral fora, defense, and security cooperation agreements to advance these objectives.

Supporting and Expanding Regional Architecture

We support contributing to regional frameworks in South Asia that can promote unity and support the region's free and open order, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Our work with multilateral groups such as the Quadrilateral Dialogue (U.S.-Japan-Australia-India) coordinates joint action on shared concerns. These groups serve as significant fora for coordinating COVID-19 pandemic relief, responding to PRC malign influence activities, and resisting PRC efforts to dominate information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure.

The United States, Australia, India, and Japan meet in the "Quad" format to advance shared Indo-Pacific goals, push back on authoritarian pressure in the region, and strengthen India's growing strategic orientation toward the Indo-Pacific. Quad coordination serves as a key avenue for enriching the U.S.-India global comprehensive strategic partnership and deepening India's bilateral ties with Australia and Japan. The inaugural Quad Leaders Summit on March 12 underscored the Quad's commitment to addressing climate change and the health and economic impacts of COVID-19, and to cooperate on areas of mutual interest including critical and emerging technologies, cybersecurity, infrastructure investment, countering disinformation, and democratic resilience in the Indo-Pacific. All four Quad members share strong support for ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman: Thank you and the other members of this committee for your continued support of these vital efforts. Our ability to invest our time and resources on these critical issues in South Asia remains in our national interest. Our support for these core democratic values helps build a more free and open Indo-Pacific region, enhancing good governance, improving security, and facilitating human development.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I welcome your questions.

Mr. BERA. Thank you, Mr. Thompson.

I now invite Mr. Bencosme to give his testimony. And I hope I am pronouncing your name correctly.

STATEMENT OF FRANCISCO BENCOSME, SENIOR ADVISOR TO THE ACTING ASSISTANT SECRETARY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, EAST ASIAN AND PACIFIC AFFAIRS BUREAU

Mr. BENCOSME. You are, Chairman. Thank you so much.

Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Chabot, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify alongside colleagues and to share our views on democracy and human rights issues in East Asia and the Pacific.

There is no question that trend lines on human rights continue to move in the wrong direction. We see it in the genocide and crimes against humanity being committed against predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and other members of ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang, and in the repression of Tibetans' distinct language, religion, and culture, and the ongoing repression of human rights and fundamental freedoms across China. The people of Hong Kong see the reduction of their freedoms every day. The coup in Burma is another example of this discouraging trend. Governments in the region are increasingly considering laws and regulations that would restrict the activities of NGO's or enhance government monitoring of them, and have increasingly diminished freedoms online in places like Vietnam and Indonesia. We see it in the attacks on the imprisonment of opposition politicians, anticorruption activists, human rights defenders, lawyers, and journalists.

I would summarize our strategy in promoting democracy and human rights in two ways. The first part is ensuring that democracies deliver both here in the U.S. and in the Indo-Pacific. And the second is helping promote accountability for serious human rights violations in the region.

On their first overseas trip to the region, Secretary Blinken and Secretary Austin Stated: It is strongly in our interest for the Indo-Pacific region to be free and open, anchored by respect for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. This is a goal that Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. share, and we will work together closely to achieve it.

In the first few months of the Biden-Harris administration, we have hosted historic summits with both of those key allies and with the Quad. In these engagements, we have not only made countering the two human rights crisis in Burma a key facet of our diplomacy, but sought to ensure that democracies like Japan, Korea, and Australia can deliver for their people. That means whether it comes to issues like vaccine, diplomacy, climate financing, or inclusive economic growth, delivering and ensuring U.S. leadership is present are vital to countering growing authoritarianism.

As Secretary Blinken has made clear, the test America and others' democracies face is to analyze the challenges we face and make changes to more effectively deliver for our citizens, because failing to do so only gives rhetorical ammunition to autocracies like China.

Second, we have worked hard to promote accountability in the region, to deter abusers from acting with impunity. Just last week,

we issued an executive order that will prohibit U.S. transactions relating to Chinese companies that export Chinese surveillance technology to facilitate human rights repression abroad. We condemn steps by the Hong Kong government to ban Tiananmen commemorations and called for the immediate release of those who are arrested. We have sanctioned multiple PRC and Hong Kong officials and are leading an international coalition that will stand up to Beijing's ongoing genocide, crimes against humanity, and forced labor abuses in Xinjiang, as well as human rights abuses elsewhere.

On Burma, we have condemned the coup and horrific violence in the strongest possible terms, and will continue to lead the international community in taking concrete action to promote accountability for the military's junta actions both before and after the coup. We have sanctioned coup leaders and military businesses, and will continue to look for ways to deny sources of revenue that support the regime's repressive, undemocratic measures.

Moreover, the coup has brought further volatility to a country already facing a humanitarian crisis for members of ethnic and religious minority groups, especially the Rohingya.

Our alliance with the Philippines is our oldest in East Asia, forged in shared defense of freedom and critical to a free and open Indo-Pacific. We continue to promote democracy through sustained constructive engagement and have both publicly and privately raised concerns and pushed for further progress. We have continuously urged Philippine counterparts to investigate allegations of human rights violations and promote accountability for those responsible.

On Cambodia, we are deeply concerned about the ongoing politically motivated trials of opposition members, journalists, and activists there. During her recent meeting with Prime Minister Hun Sen, Deputy Secretary of State Sherman underscored the importance of human rights and the protection of fundamental freedoms as integral to our bilateral relationship. She urged the Cambodian Government to abide by its international and domestic human rights commitments and to ensure the protection of worker rights. We will continue to press the government to reopen civic and political space in advance of the 2022 commune and 2023 national elections. We will also work with like-minded partners to press for reforms in Cambodia.

I have seen firsthand how Congress' partnership in this area has made a substantial impact on U.S. human rights policy in East Asia. And I want to take this moment to thank Congress for their steadfast support for democracy and human rights in the region.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Bencosme follows:]

**Statement of
Francisco Bencosme, Senior Advisor
Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs
Democracy in the Indo-Pacific
June 9, 2021**

Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Chabot, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you. I am grateful to Congress for bipartisan action in support of American diplomacy in East Asia and the Pacific, and ongoing support for democracy in the Indo-Pacific region. I am honored to be here with you today, especially alongside Deputy Assistant Secretary Stone, Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Busby, and Deputy Assistant Administrator Hart.

The United States' whole-of-government commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific is focused on building the capacity of Indo-Pacific nations and regional institutions to promote civil society, rule of law, transparency, and accountable governance to strengthen democracy and counter malign influence in the region. Regional stability is best built on mutual trust between people and their governments through upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms. Partnerships that act to combat corruption and promote effective civil society are more successful than those that exert coercive authoritarian control. These values are at the center of our efforts in the Indo-Pacific to address challenges such as weak institutions, systemic corruption, and opaque business environments that undermine our own competitiveness and enable malign influence.

As Secretary Blinken recently noted at the Release of the 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices last month, the trend lines on human rights continue to move in the wrong direction. We are concerned by an increase in government efforts in many places across the Indo-Pacific region to shrink the space for civil society and democratic institutions through increased restrictions on human rights, particularly freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association.

We see it in the genocide and crimes against humanity being committed against predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and other members of ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang, in the repression of Tibetans' distinct language, religion, and culture, and the ongoing repression of human rights and fundamental freedoms across China. Governments in the region are increasingly considering laws and regulations that would restrict the activities of NGOs or enhance government monitoring of them, and have increasingly cracked down on freedom

online. We see it in attacks on and the imprisonment of opposition politicians, anti-corruption activists, human rights defenders, lawyers, and journalists in Hong Kong, Cambodia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia.

And most egregiously, we see it in Burma where the military removed the democratically elected government in a coup in February and has since brutally crackdown on protesters opposing the military junta, killing hundreds and detaining thousands." These alarming trend lines have only worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, which some governments have used as a pretext to target their critics and further repress human rights.

With the Biden-Harris Administration and the Department's renewed focus on promoting respect for human rights, countering corruption, strengthening democratic resilience, and taking a multilateral approach to addressing big global challenges, we will remain active in capacity-building efforts both bilaterally and multilaterally. Some priorities for the coming year are coordinating programming to address Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong Burma, and other governance crises; ensuring bilateral discussions include tailored approaches that focus on positive outcomes from good governance; leveraging and expanding on our engagement with existing multilateral frameworks such as APEC, ASEAN, the Mekong-U.S. Partnership, and the Quad to strengthen democratic institutions, promote respect for human rights, counter corruption, and support strong civil society; coordinating programming to enable access of information to all, including protecting the media, bringing to light environmental harm in communities, and promoting accountability for malign actors who spread disinformation and misinformation; coordination on programming to support environmental governance including efforts to address the effects of climate change, pollution, and environmental degradation, its disproportionate impact on marginalized and underserved communities, and the high rates of violence targeting environmental defenders; and leveraging and expanding on existing tools to drive improvements in governance, including sanctions programs like the Global Magnitsky, and various reporting tools like the Human Rights, Trafficking in Persons, and International Religious Freedom reports. All assistance is provided consistent with applicable law, including the Leahy laws. Through careful and effective Leahy vetting, EAP ensures that no assistance is furnished to any security force unit where there is credible information implicating that unit in the commission of a gross violation of human rights.

Let me take this opportunity to discuss in further detail the human rights and democracy situations in Burma, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia. I will provide a brief outline of our activities in these six areas.

- **Burma:** We continue to call on the Burmese military to refrain from violence, release all those unjustly detained, and restore Burma to the path of democracy. This military coup contradicts the will of the people of Burma, and we will continue to support the people of Burma as they work to overcome this crisis. We have condemned the coup and horrific violence in the strongest possible terms and will continue to lead the international community in taking concrete action to promote accountability for the military junta's horrific actions both before and after the coup. We have sanctioned coup leaders and military businesses and will continue to look for additional ways to deny revenue to the junta and its leaders. Moreover, the coup has brought further volatility to a country already facing a human rights and humanitarian crisis for members of ethnic and religious minority groups, particularly Rohingya. We hear the calls from members of Burma's pro-democracy movement and will continue to support their efforts.
- **Cambodia:** We are deeply concerned about the ongoing politically motivated trials of opposition members, journalists, and activists in Cambodia. During her recent meeting with Prime Minister Hun Sen, Deputy Secretary of State Sherman underscored the importance of human rights and the protection of fundamental freedoms as integral to our bilateral relationship. She urged the Cambodian government to abide by its international and domestic human rights commitments and to ensure the protection of worker rights. The United States remains committed to the Cambodian people and their aspirations for a more prosperous, democratic, and independent country, where all voices are heard and respected and the Kingdom's sovereignty is protected. We will continue to press the government to reopen civic and political space in advance of the 2022 commune and 2023 national elections.
- **Hong Kong:** The PRC continues to undermine Hong Kong's autonomy and civil liberties, despite its obligations under the Sino-British Joint Declaration. Since the June 30, 2020 imposition of the National Security Law, the Department of State has repeatedly expressed concern regarding attempts to stifle dissent and opposition voices in Hong Kong. Hong Kong authorities have engaged in mass arrests of democracy activists, delayed parliamentary elections, disqualified sitting lawmakers, and altered the

composition of the Legislative Council and Chief Executive Election Committee. Hong Kong authorities have arrested and prosecuted journalists and passed legislation that would allow for exit bans to be placed on individuals seeking to leave the territory. We will continue to work with like-minded partners to highlight these concerning developments and examine all available policy tools to promote accountability for the Beijing and Hong Kong officials responsible.

- **Thailand:** With more than 200 years of friendship between the United States and Thailand, we are deeply committed to the strong security, economic, and people-to-people ties that exist between our countries. The United States prioritizes democracy and human rights across our foreign policy and in our relationship in Thailand. Protests calling for reforms in Thailand have been smaller and less frequent in 2021. We continue to message to Thailand's government, opposition parties, and civil society the importance for all democracies to strengthen our institutions and take steps to protect the rights of all our citizens. We have been clear that the United States supports fundamental freedoms, including freedoms of expression and association, as essential to Thailand's democracy.
- **Philippines:** Our alliance with the Philippines is our oldest in East Asia and critical to a free and open Indo-Pacific. Promoting respect for human rights is a central priority in U.S. relations with the Philippines – we recognize that a Philippine government that respects democracy and human rights is essential to maintaining a strong alliance. We continue to promote democracy and respect for human rights in the Philippines through sustained constructive engagement with all levels of the government, security forces, and civil society. We have urged Philippine counterparts to investigate allegations of human rights violations and promote accountability for those responsible. We also urge the Philippines to respect freedom of expression, including for members of the media. We remain concerned by the cases against Philippine online media outlet Rappler CEO Maria Ressa and Senator Leila de Lima and urge the government to resolve the charges equitably in accordance with Philippines law. U.S. support to the Philippines is an effective tool in the Administration's efforts to promote the respect for human rights. Our support for civil society and rule-of-law capacity building in the Philippines helps advance respect for human rights, strengthen media capability and independence, enhance political participation, bolster civic engagement, and expand the democratic civic space.

- **Indonesia:** Indonesia has made impressive strides in the last 23 years as it transitioned to a multi-party democracy with regular, credible elections. As the world's third largest democracy and home to the largest Muslim population, Indonesia serves as a model, not just in the region but also globally, of tolerant, pluralistic democracy. While this young democracy continues to make significant progress, as in many other countries, government institutions face challenges as they work to improve management of public services, protect human rights, and address the drivers of violent extremism and terrorist radicalization as well as address issues such as corruption and ensure accountability. Indonesia's progress in strengthening democratic governance and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms both offline and online has helped Indonesia expand its influence in the Indo-Pacific. Through our assistance, the U.S. government is partnering with Indonesia to strengthen democratic governance and fortify resilience against violent extremism, while strengthening an inclusive, just, and accountable democracy that protects all individuals' rights, roots out corruption, engages with an active civil society and media, and strengthens a culture of pluralism and tolerance.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to your questions.

Mr. BERA. Thank you, Mr. Bencosme.
I now invite Mr. Hart to give his testimony.

STATEMENT OF CRAIG HART, ACTING SENIOR DEPUTY ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR FOR EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC, U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr. HART. Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Chabot, distinguished subcommittee members, thank you very much for inviting me to testify on USAID's vital role in the Indo-Pacific in defending and promoting democratic norms in institutions.

We know that societies that respect and defend human rights and protect fundamental freedoms are more stable, prosperous, and secure; make strong trade partners; and are better equipped to confront global challenges. Yet throughout the Indo-Pacific, we face significant challenges for democracy assistance in a dramatically altered development environment.

During a time when democracy was already under a threat, the COVID-19 pandemic has, in many countries, accelerated democratic backsliding and allowed autocrats to further consolidate power. While we shift significant resources to much needed medical, humanitarian, and economic responses to COVID-19, we must not lose sight of the need for robust democracy, human rights, and governance support.

USAID is committed to integrating democratic programming throughout our long-term sustainable development approach, which is grounded in a strong understanding of the local context. This includes efforts to promote human rights, increase access to justice, foster accountable and transparent governance, enable an independent and active civil society, and safeguard political integrity.

In collaboration with like-minded allies and partners, we are focused on countering aggressive efforts by authoritarian leaders and strategic competitors to undermine democratic institutions and sow internal discord that drives polarization.

In Sri Lanka, following the Easter 2019 attacks, USAID trained youth from disparate ethnicities to counter divisive hate speech and disinformation on social media through networking and content that promotes pluralism and peace-building.

In Cambodia, we support the development and launch of the country's first fact-checking website that has since increased the national conversation about fake news.

And USAID is prioritizing its accountable governance work, including public administration, public financial management and oversight, transparency and the accountability mechanisms at all levels of government.

In Nepal, for example, as the country continues to solidify its historic devolution of powers, we are helping foster greater accountability and transparency in the planning and management of public funds. At the subnational level, USAID trained local and provincial officials to use the country's Federal level public financial management system, which provides a safeguard against public corruption and misuse of funds.

In the Pacific Islands, USAID is working with the election commissions of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands as they seek to conduct safe elections in the midst of the pandemic.

In the absence of international observers due to the travel restrictions, we helped safely mobilize local observers for elections last August in Papua New Guinea.

USAID is also expanding our support for human rights rule of law and citizen empowerment, with an emphasis on addressing discrimination, inequity, and marginalization in all of its forms. So in Burma, following the February 1 military coup, USAID immediately redirected \$42 million of assistance away from the work that could have benefited the junta-controlled government. We instead directed the assistance to civil society, independent media, on lifesaving activities that directly benefit the people of Burma.

Across Asia, USAID has helped reduce the violence, discrimination, and stigma faced by LGBTQI+ people by supporting the development of 23 inclusive laws and policies over the past 6 years.

We are enhancing equal access to justice for all. For example, in Indonesia, USAID has helped 10 legal aid partners increase the number of people they serve by more than 1,000 percent since 2017. And in Laos, USAID is helping the government to substantially increase its provision of free legal services by more than tripling its number of legal aid offices.

In closing, countries with democratic processes and institutions are more just, peaceful, and stable, enabling citizens to pursue and fulfill their potential. Yet in the Indo-Pacific, significant deficits in citizen response of governance and respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and democratic norms and institutions compromise stability and prosperity in a region which is home to more than half the world's population.

While USAID has been adapting to meet these challenges, we also recognize that much more needs to be done, and we are looking forward to doing it in alignment with this administration's priorities and in consultation with the U.S. Congress.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Hart follows:]

Statement of Craig Hart
Acting Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator, Bureau for Asia
U.S. Agency for International Development
Hearing before the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation
Committee on Foreign Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives

“Democratic Values in the Indo-Pacific in an era of strategic competition”

June 9, 2021

Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Chabot, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for inviting me to testify on the vital role of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in the Indo-Pacific in defending and promoting democratic norms and institutions—which President Biden holds as central to U.S. foreign policy. It is an honor to testify before this Subcommittee, and a pleasure to be here alongside my colleagues from the U.S. Department of State, Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Scott Busby, Acting Assistant Secretary Dean Thompson, and Senior Advisor Francisco Bencosme.

The United States Government’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance conveys President Biden’s vision for how America will engage with the world. Front and center to this engagement is working with like-minded allies and partners to defend and promote democratic norms and institutions—to combat threats to free societies, and to lead and sustain a stable and open international system.

Alongside diplomacy and defense, USAID’s development and humanitarian work is integral to achieving this vision. Democratic governance and human rights are critical components of sustainable development and lasting peace. Human rights and fundamental freedoms of citizens are the bedrock for managing and mitigating conflict, spurring economic growth, and protecting human dignity. Countries with democratic processes and institutions are more just, peaceful, and stable, enabling citizens to pursue and fulfill their potential. USAID is committed to integrating democracy programming throughout our core development work, focusing across all sectors to strengthen and promote human rights, increase access to justice, foster accountable and transparent governance, and enable an independent and active civil society.

Across the Indo-Pacific, the development environment has been dramatically altered by the impacts of COVID-19 and other factors, which has created significant challenges for democracy assistance. These include the resurgence of authoritarianism, an increase in democratic backsliding, the spread of digital authoritarianism, rampant disinformation, growing inequality, and strategic competition by other actors like the People’s Republic of China (PRC). We are seeing an increase in trafficking of persons and gender-based violence (GBV), which affect the most vulnerable in society. During a time when democracy was already under threat, the COVID-19 pandemic has, in many countries, accelerated democratic backsliding and allowed autocrats to further consolidate power. Some governments have exploited pandemic-related health and safety restrictions to violate human rights and curtail fundamental freedoms. Threats to freedom of expression and independent media have worsened. Authoritarian regimes are using technology to stifle dissent. Misinformation, disinformation, online harassment, surveillance

systems, and simply shutting down the internet are becoming common. In authoritarian environments, governments are using the pandemic to further limit political space, consolidate power, and deepen existing backsliding trends. In fragile democracies, the response to COVID-19 is straining weak institutions and democratic principles and practices, and impeding political competition. A poor pandemic response in many countries further erodes trust between citizens and their governments and increases opportunity for corruption.

While we shift significant resources to support much-needed medical, humanitarian, and economic responses to COVID-19, we must not lose sight of the need for significant support for democracy, human rights, and governance so we can retain years of U.S. investments and gains. In support of the Biden Administration's stated priority in the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance to "revitalize democracy the world over," USAID is deepening and expanding efforts to address today's threats to free societies. I'll next briefly highlight some of our work applicable to today's hearing topic.

Counter authoritarianism, address strategic competitors, and strengthen core democratic institutions and processes

In advancing U.S. interests and our development objectives in the Indo-Pacific, USAID faces increasing challenges from authoritarian leaders and strategic competitors whose aims run counter to our own. In collaboration with like-minded allies and partners, we are focused on countering aggressive efforts by authoritarian leaders to undermine democratic institutions and processes and democratization globally. USAID is focused on implementing its long-term sustainable development approach—steeped in a strong understanding of the local context—to directly counter the internal factors that are driving autocratization and polarization in partner countries. USAID is well positioned through its programs to shore up institutions of accountability and justice to resist creeping authoritarianism.

In the Kyrgyz Republic, members of Parliament introduced a bill which was largely copied from a well-known Russian law that establishes *de facto* censorship across independent media. The bill was immediately declared unconstitutional by Kyrgyzstani civil society, lawyers, and journalists. USAID supported media experts to engage the government on the dire consequences of such a bill. Bolstered by USAID's support for independent media, the resulting public outcry—online, in the press, and through peaceful protests in the capital—prompted the President to refuse to sign the bill into law.

To counter disinformation and divisive hate speech after the Easter 2019 attacks in Sri Lanka, USAID trained more than 100 youth from disparate ethnicities across the country. These youth learned to network and create content that promoted pluralism and peace building. For several months, the positive messages countered misleading and divisive content, reaching more than two million people and engaging more than one million social media users. A select group of youth trainees now serve as "Cyber Guardians" to continue countering hate speech and fake news.

Within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), USAID supports the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights design recommendations for the

implementation of ASEAN commitments under Article 23 of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration on freedom of opinion and expression. USAID is developing a comprehensive training-of-trainers program on media literacy to address disinformation, fake news, and misinformation in the region. As a result of USAID training programs implemented in partnership with ASEAN, over 50 young leaders from across ASEAN are better able to draw upon media and technology to raise awareness and develop social campaigns on topics of interest and import, including those that promote inclusion and tolerance and address governance challenges in their communities.

In a similar manner, we supported the Women’s Media Centre in Cambodia to develop and launch CrossCheck, Cambodia’s first fact-checking website that has since increased the national conversation about fake news. These are two of the many growing efforts that we are undertaking to address disinformation, much of it purported by strategic competitors seeking to destabilize democratic institutions and erode civil discourse.

USAID is fulfilling its congressional directive in support of Tibetans in the Tibet Autonomous Region and adjacent provinces with significant Tibetan populations including cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and livelihoods development on the Tibetan Plateau. USAID support has strengthened the capacity of over 30,000 Tibetans to restore grassland in their communities upon which their livestock depend, and helped more than 12,000 Tibetans secure new or better employment in livelihoods that help them sustain their culture. USAID’s support for Tibetans extends also to India and Nepal, enabling the exiled communities there to achieve their economic and cultural self-reliance so that they are able to counter cultural assimilation pressures both within and outside the Tibetan plateau.

Combat corruption and strengthen accountability

USAID is prioritizing its institutional development work—including public administration, public financial management, and oversight, transparency, and accountability mechanisms at all levels of government. This includes promoting citizen-responsive and democratic approaches, and building the capacity of countries to prevent, detect, and prosecute corruption while addressing the underlying drivers that allow corruption to flourish. Key to this effort is our support for civil society, investigative journalists, independent and credible election observers, and private sector stakeholders to provide oversight and ensure government accountability. At the same time, we strive to strengthen institutions such as judiciaries, parliaments, and local governments while supporting civil society to make those institutions accountable to their people.

In the Philippines, USAID helped improve government accountability in procurement. To prevent unnecessary delays in procuring essential commodities for the country’s COVID-19 response, the Philippine Government passed a law making its emergency procurement rules more streamlined and flexible. In support, USAID worked closely with the government to develop and launch its official online portal for the government’s procurement of essential items during crises or emergencies. The portal promotes procurement transparency and accountability and reduces costs for both the government and vendors. Between April 2020 and May 2021, more than 2,200 procuring entities registered and secured more than 20,000 contracts for goods and services valued at more than \$1.2 billion. USAID is now working to integrate the emergency

procurement portal into the government's electronic procurement system, and to enable electronic bidding for goods, services, and infrastructure projects.

In Nepal, we are helping to foster greater accountability and transparency in planning and management of public funds. Nepal is in the midst of a historic devolution of powers as it transitions to a federal structure. The devolution of authorities to the subnational level is a new practice in Nepal that requires local governments to implement new systems and business processes in order to effectively fulfill their mandates. This includes local-level adoption of the country's federal level public financial management (PFM) system, which enables local governments to execute public funds effectively, efficiently, transparently, and accountably, and provides a safeguard against public corruption and misuse of funds. In support of this, USAID trained officials representing every local and provincial government to use the PFM software to improve budget planning, accounting, and reporting. As a result of USAID's assistance, 99 percent of local governments use the PFM software.

In response to unscheduled courtroom closures and other disruptions to the delivery of justice in 2020 caused by COVID-19, with USAID support, Indonesia made online criminal court proceedings legal, ensuring continuity of justice during the pandemic. With the ability to facilitate remote participation in court proceedings, Indonesia has maintained a functioning justice system during the pandemic. This new openness is expected to stay in place even after the pandemic subsides. Since 2016, USAID has trained over 10,500 government officials, judges, and judicial assistants in anti-corruption, transparency, and accountability practices while upgrading the digital tools of the Indonesian Supreme Court and the special anti-corruption court to make case adjudication more efficient.

In Burma, the military junta attempted to justify its coup by pointing to myths about a flawed election. USAID's support to the Asian Network of Free Elections (ANFREL), and other credible election observers, provided additional evidence that, while flaws existed, Burma's 2020 election was credible and largely reflected the will of the people. ANFREL recently produced a report fact-checking the junta's claims and finding mostly "false truths, misrepresented facts, and inaccuracies." USAID's confidence in the quality of the election is further bolstered by the depth of our support in the years prior to the coup to political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs) supporting voter election information, and the Union Elections Commission.

USAID is working with the election commissions of Pacific Island countries like Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands as they seek to conduct safe elections in the midst of a pandemic. For example, we helped safely mobilize local observers (in the absence of international observers due to travel restrictions) for elections last August in Papua New Guinea, providing a model for other Pacific Island countries to emulate.

Broaden support for human rights, rule of law, and citizen empowerment

With the Administration's priority to defend and protect human rights, USAID is positioning to broaden its support for human rights, rule of law, and citizen empowerment, with an emphasis on addressing discrimination, inequity, and marginalization in all its forms.

The PRC continues to commit egregious human rights abuses, including crimes against humanity and genocide against Uyghurs and members of other religious and ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang, which Secretary Blinken has determined constitute genocide and crimes against humanity. USAID takes these atrocities very seriously and is responding to them by supporting the documentation of genocide and crimes against humanity. We will soon launch a new religious freedom activity that will in part address the Uyghur crisis. USAID welcomes Congress's bipartisan support on this issue.

We are expanding support for civil society, human rights defenders, and independent media to promote accountability for those in power. In Burma, following the February 1 military coup, USAID immediately redirected \$42 million of assistance away from work that could have benefited the junta-controlled government, and directed the assistance to civil society, independent media, and life-saving activities that directly benefit the people of Burma. Amid the deteriorating human rights situation and expansion of violence in ethnic areas, pro-democracy support is USAID's primary objective for the foreseeable future. USAID provides critical emergency assistance to protect civil society activists, sustain independent media, and maintain democratic voices.

In Nepal, USAID is elevating the voices of the 40 percent of the country's population that is marginalized by ethnicity, caste, or religion and generally disregarded in government planning and policy development. To help close this gap in representation, USAID trained approximately 400 human rights defenders and 1,800 students to strengthen their leadership capacity. As a result, these trainees advocated for the rights of marginalized populations, especially Dalits, women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) people, and were able to bring their issues to local government planning levels. Also, USAID informed Nepal's Universal Periodic Review of human rights and shadow reporting by supporting 39 consultations nationwide that included input from more than 600 CSOs and a high-level technical review of the development of five laws which were critical to the implementation of constitutionally-guaranteed fundamental rights.

In Sri Lanka, USAID helped expand CSOs' work in the human rights space, lead inclusion activities for LGBTQI+ individuals, and address GBV as a human rights issue through engagement with state officials and policymakers. CSOs advocated before state institutions to address land rights violations; to push for reparations and justice for victims and families of the disappeared; to raise awareness and seek redress for victims of torture, and arbitrary arrests and detentions; and to document and raise awareness of religiously motivated violence. USAID supported a national land rights network that helped more than 70 CSOs, which organized into five regional networks in five provinces, to more effectively advocate for land rights. USAID support also contributed to the fight against torture in Sri Lanka by supporting networking for a journalists' collective, through which journalists can improve their capacity to report on allegations of torture, galvanize action, and raise public awareness.

In Cambodia, USAID helps civil society organizations operate in the country's increasingly restrictive environment, helping them promote and protect people's rights under the Cambodian constitution. Additionally, USAID works with human rights organizations to provide legal support and counseling to those on trial, and to advocate against repressive legislation. Our

citizen empowerment efforts in Cambodia have yielded tangible successes. For example, citizen journalists raised awareness about deficiencies in the delivery of essential public services, with USAID support. Citizens then engaged local authorities on the insufficient release of irrigation water and problems with solid waste collection around a popular market, which prompted government actions to address them.

In partnership with ASEAN, USAID launched a series of national-level policy dialogues on migrant worker rights, which is the first step toward implementing the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers.

To promote human rights, USAID helped draft standardized guidelines on the treatment of trafficking victims for national-level implementation in accordance with the 2015 ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. USAID also partnered with the International Labour Organization to support ASEAN's revision and renewed commitment to the ASEAN Roadmap for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor by 2025.

USAID is also seeking to stand up its first regional project to promote freedom of religion or belief and freedom of conscience. We realize that much of the conflict in our region is both religiously and ethnically linked and we hope to use this activity to improve conditions for religious minorities, promote religious pluralism in places where believers face restrictions to practicing their faith, and increase the role of religious leaders as conflict mediators and advocates for human rights and fundamental freedoms. This project will also seek to work with members of religious minority groups, including Uyghurs who have been displaced from China, enabling them to tell their stories to the world.

We cannot help build resilient democracies without also combating inequality and discrimination. An unjust and unequal society will never achieve its full potential. USAID places particular emphasis on inclusive development, expanding rights and opportunities for women and girls; persons with disabilities; displaced persons; LGBTQI+ persons; indigenous peoples; and other historically marginalized populations, including ethnic and religious minorities.

USAID helped develop ASEAN's first Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework and led the research to support the launch of ASEAN's Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security. Both landmark efforts provide ASEAN with a base of knowledge and a pathway toward enhancing women's civic participation and leadership as well as advancing gender equality across the entire ASEAN community.

Over the past six years, USAID has helped reduce the violence, discrimination, and stigma faced by LGBTQI+ people across Asia through regional and country-specific programs that supported local civil society organizations and provided emergency response grants. USAID formed a support coalition of 1,357 governmental and non-governmental organizations; built momentum for LGBTQI+ inclusion in business, education, and media sectors across ASEAN; and supported the development of 23 inclusive laws and policies across Asia.

In countries such as Indonesia and Laos, USAID is advancing the rule of law by enhancing equal access to justice for all. In Indonesia, USAID has helped increase access to justice for underprivileged and marginalized populations. Since 2017, USAID has worked directly with 10 legal aid partners, increasing the number of people they serve by more than 1,000 percent. In Laos, USAID supported the Government of Laos to expand legal aid services to reach vulnerable populations. By the end of this year, USAID will have helped the government to more than triple the number of legal aid offices in Laos from 54 to 165.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman: President Biden is committed to a foreign policy that unites our democratic norms and institutions with our leadership on the world stage—one that is centered on promoting democracy and advancing human rights. We know that societies that respect and defend human rights and protect fundamental freedoms are more stable, prosperous, and secure, make strong trade partners, and are better equipped to confront global challenges. Yet in the Indo-Pacific, significant deficits in citizen-responsive governance and respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and democratic norms and institutions compromise stability and prosperity in a region of the world home to the majority of humanity. While USAID and its partners have been adapting to meet these challenges, we also recognize that much more needs to be done, and we are looking forward to doing so in alignment with this Administration's priorities and in consultation with the U.S. Congress. Thank you.

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Mr. BERA. Thank you, Mr. Hart.

And thank you all for your testimony.

I will now recognize members for 5 minutes each. And pursuant to House rules, all time yielded is for the purposes of questioning our witnesses.

Because of the virtual format of this hearing, I will recognize members by committee seniority, alternating between Democrats and Republicans. If you miss your turn, please let our staff know and we will circle back to you. If you seek recognition, you must unmute your microphone and address the chair verbally.

I will start by recognizing myself for 5 minutes of questioning.

And maybe this is a question for Mr. Thompson, initially. As chair, when I think about my travel schedule pre-pandemic, we have made it a point to visit some of these smaller countries that are younger democracies, whether that is Sri Lanka, we went to Malaysia, we went to Nepal, also the Philippines, and had a chance to meet with some of the USAID workers as well as the NGO's on the ground helping these young democracies.

Mr. Thompson, my sense is, in Malaysia—and in your opening testimony you touched on it—that that young parliament, has struggled and has backslid; same in Nepal; and, what the Rajapaksa government looked like, certainly it was democratically elected, it does look like they are putting in place some rules in passing through parliament, some rules that, could be considered antidemocratic.

If you could give us an update on that region, go into a little bit more with those three countries in specific, that would be great.

Mr. THOMPSON. Sure, Mr. Chairman. Thanks for the question. And it was actually—I am covering South and Central Asian affairs now. I was in Malaysia at the time of your visit, and it was great to welcome you there and have you come through.

I will talk a little bit about Sri Lanka and Nepal and the situation in my region, and then perhaps if there is a minute, Francisco can talk about Malaysia, specifically, since EAP covers that part of the world. But I think you are absolutely right, this is an area of concern that we watch very carefully.

You notice that in Sri Lanka, in October 2020, the President used his coalition super majority to pass constitutional amendment that consolidated power and reinstated a lot of powers that had been in the hands of the President previously but had been devolved out under prior administration.

So, it is always a concern when you see this kind of centralization of power. But as you rightfully noted, our work with civil society, our work with democracy building in these areas can be very effective and very important in helping these countries start to, push back on what may be a consolidation of power in one particular area.

In Nepal, you very rightfully noted that the last couple of years has seen quite a lot of churn, I would say, in their democratic system. The President just for the second time in as many years, I believe, dissolved parliament. However, I would say everything there has continued to proceed in a legal and democratic fashion. And so we continue to work with the governments there to see how we can—how we can promote where they are headed on that front.

With that, I will stop if you have more, or if you want to hear from Francisco.

Sir, you are muted.

Mr. BERA. Mr. Bencosme, if you want to give us an update on Malaysia.

Mr. BENCOSME. Yes. No, similarly, we have seen a couple of areas where there was really abrupt transition of power in Malaysia. We have seen attack on human rights activists and sort of an uptick in discrimination and pushback of refugees, particularly the Rohingya, in places like Malaysia; all really concerning trends.

And so our embassy at every level has been trying to push and urge the government to respect and honor their obligation, international obligations of human rights. But it is also the work that USAID and civil society, as you mentioned, do in sort of working in sort of local, populations to really support sort of a culture, support refugees who are trying to find, sort of a basic income inside their countries and also foster an area of sort of a respect for human rights within the public population.

Mr. BERA. Great.

And in the last 30 seconds that I have, maybe for Mr. Hart, what are some of our most effective tools that we can use to strengthen some of these civil society organizations and help, these young democracies survive and thrive?

Mr. HART. Chairman Bera, thank you for the question. I think that in terms of our approach toward civil society, one, we are not alone. And so we are working with like-minded partners to support civil society, but also media, parliament. Looking specifically at Sri Lanka, we are looking across the spectrum to make sure that there is complementarity between the systems. And so we are working with the courts, for example, to increase their effectiveness of the judiciary, establishing model courts that demonstrate greater efficiency and transparency.

We are also very much working with the use across the board, but also in civil society organizations, so much of the energy is there as well. And so looking for ways in which we can engage there, as well as with the media and enhancing the media's ability to report on a live-time basis, do fact-checking, have those conversations with the civil society members that we are also supporting, all of those things come together.

Mr. BERA. Great. Thank you.

And I notice my time has expired. So let me go ahead and turn to the ranking member, Mr. Chabot, for his 5 minutes of questions.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will not direct my questions at any particular witness. I will let the panel decide which one—and just one, if you would, because I have got a number of questions.

Past U.S. administrations have attempted to steer China toward behavior that is more respectful of human rights and the rule of law and democracy. Using a range of policy tools, including U.S. assistance for rule of law programs and Chinese civil society, bilateral human rights dialogs, sanctions, open criticism sometime, and various forms of engagement; nothing, quite frankly, seems to have worked very well.

What options are there that this administration is considering for U.S. multilateral action on human rights that might have some chance of making some progress there?

Mr. BUSBY. Well, thank you, Ranking Member Chabot. Scott Busby here. We are looking to partner with like-minded allies in speaking out about the abuses in China and taking action against them. We are looking to do so in the Human Rights Council, for instance, as well as the General Assembly and other U.N. Institutions.

But as I note in my testimony, and as the chair also noted, we are looking at taking tougher action as well, including the sanctions that we jointly announced with the EU, Canada, and the U.K. And I would note that those jointly announced sanctions sparked a significant reaction from the PRC, which, to our mind, demonstrates their effectiveness in getting the PRC's attention. So it is that type of joint action among like-minded allies that we are primarily focused on.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you. Well, there is no question that we do need to be tougher, because their behavior, virtually across the board, has been abhorrent. And I know the previous administration tried a whole range of things; some things worked, some things did not. And I would strongly encourage this administration to move forward on that.

By many accounts, the U.S. and India, as the world's two largest democracies, are uniquely poised to join forces in promoting democratic values in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, and I am assuming that this administration would agree with that. If so, what initiatives does this administration intend to pursue to take advantage of that unique relationship, which, really, the U.S. and India have as the two largest democracies?

Mr. THOMPSON. Mr. Ranking Member, Dean Thompson here with SCA. Thank you for the question. I think it is a timely one and an important issue to consider. We are, right now, through our global comprehensive strategic partnership with India, looking at areas where we can work together to strengthen across the region the effects of—or the ability of countries to push back on malign influence. And through the Quad initiative, where we have brought in Japan and Australia as well, we have a tremendous opportunity to work together with four like-minded countries, all democracies, that are looking at ways we can help deliver tremendous relief in the wake of COVID-19; that can look at how we set standards and work together on critical technologies and diversifying supply chains; and, finally, can fight climate change and work on improving the environmental situation across the region.

So it is a particularly exciting time on those fronts, and we look forward to continuing our work with India and our other partners. Thank you.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you. I think I have got time to squeeze in one more question. And I want to encourage you to continue in the Quad relationship. I think that is—the chairman, Mr. Bera, and I, have been involved in that and have met with the players in that, and I think there is tremendous opportunity there. So we should take advantage of that.

I want to conclude on Cambodia and kind of get the Administration's view there. Congressman Lowenthal and I worked on this for many years, it is out of the Cambodia Caucus. And Hun Sen continues, obviously, to crack down on the opposition party and civil society. What more can we do to actually make some progress in Cambodia? Whoever wants to answer that briefly.

Mr. BUSBY. Francisco, why do not you take that one.

Mr. BENCOSME. I am happy to.

This is Francisco from East Asian and Pacific Bureau. So as I mentioned in my opening statement, Deputy Secretary Sherman was just in Cambodia, met with civil society, including opposition leader Kem Sokha, during her visit. And I think one of the important things we will be looking at is the upcoming elections in Cambodia, as well as broadening the international community pressure, working with partners and allies to push forward human rights issues in Cambodia as we sort of look toward the next couple of months and years out.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you. My time has expired.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. BERA. Thank you.

Let me go and recognize the gentleman from California, Mr. Sherman.

Mr. SHERMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We are seeing an era of what could be called authoritarianism and imperialism with Chinese characteristics. There is so much for us to respond to in the Indo-Pacific region. And to start, I want to focus a bit on the Rohingya.

Our hearts naturally go out to the pro-democracy forces in Burma-Myanmar. And yet even those forces have been less than forthright in recognizing the rights of the Rohingya people. There has been some vacillation.

Is it clear that this new government council that has been organized is on record explicitly to give full citizenship and full citizenship documents to the Rohingya people, and not just some of them, but all of those who were born either in the camps or who were born in Burma-Myanmar?

Mr. BUSBY. Thank you, Congressman, for the question. Let me start, and then I can turn to Francisco for details. I am not aware of a commitment to provide citizenship, but, indeed, the opposition has expressly recognized the rights of ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya, and indicated an intent to govern the country's—

Mr. SHERMAN. That is the weasel—if I can interject here. Those are the weasel words that have upset me so much. People asking for our help in the name of democracy who then make statements like, oh, well, we will follow the rules of Burma-Myanmar. Those existing laws are racist and discriminatory and set the foundation for ethnic cleansing.

Now that—and I realize that this question could go to and probably should go to Mr. Bencosme, perhaps he can tell us, are we demanding in return for the help that we are offering full citizenship and citizenship documents for the Rohingya or are we just going to let them skate by with vague statements about loving minorities?

And I want to interject. Their position, the position of some is they love all the ethnic groups and minorities of Burma-Myanmar. But the Rohingya, they are not Burmese, they are not counted, they are not citizenships, and, therefore, they do not get citizenship papers. And so they can make statements about how they love minorities of Burma-Myanmar and at the same time be in favor of ethnic cleansing, genocide, whatever, of the Rohingya people.

How tough are we being on those who tell us that they share our values?

Mr. BENCOSME. Thank you, Congressman Sherman, for that question. We have been in touch with the National Unity Government as well as other civil society groups. We have raised the issue of the Rohingya through our communication. I will note that their recent statements, as you absolutely stated, is not what the entirety of what we would like to see; does talk about repealing and revising the 1982 citizenship law that talks about examining issues of citizenship with respect to the Rohingya and actually made a huge declaration, which we see as a step in the right direction.

But as you completely, lay out, we want to see more, and we think that the pressure that Congress and the executive branch have put has been helpful toward reaching that goal.

Mr. SHERMAN. Okay. And then, Mr. Stone, what are we doing to highlight in Muslim countries how we are fighting to protect, not only the Rohingya, but also the Uyghurs, while many Muslim countries are deporting Uyghurs back to China for torture and death?

Mr. BUSBY. Did you mean to direct that, Congressman, to Dean Thompson, to the SCA region?

Mr. SHERMAN. To the South and Central Asian Affairs region, but any of the government witnesses can respond.

Mr. BUSBY. Go ahead, Dean, please.

Mr. THOMPSON. Yes. Apologies. No, absolutely, we raised at every opportunity with the government, particularly those with Muslim majorities, our concerns about what is happening with the Uyghurs; urge them to be vocal, urge them to stand up and stand united and be heard on this particular issue. We are, very concerned. We are pleased that some have been supportive of the Uyghurs, but we are very concerned about those cases where a recurrence may happen and want to make sure we avoid that. Thank you.

Mr. SHERMAN. If I can just interject. We have a very strong case to make to the Muslim world that we are fighting for the Rohingya, we are fighting for the Uyghurs. And in both cases, we are doing far more than many Muslim majority countries, and yet we are attacked as being anti-Muslim, which is outrageous.

I yield back.

Mr. BERA. Okay. Thank you.

Let me go now recognize the gentlelady from Missouri, Mrs. Wagner.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for organizing the hearing. And I thank our witnesses for their time in service.

The Indo-Pacific is home to some of the world's largest democracies and fastest growing economies. Yet the People's Republic of China and its dictatorial partner States are exploiting prices and instability to consolidate power, sow discord, and erode faith in

democratic institutions. It is essential that we work with our democratic partners and allies in the region to restore respect for universal human rights and prevent the CCP from fostering a resurgence in authoritarianism.

The United States must engage with this strategically, critical region to secure a future in which the rule of law, free and fair trade, and strong democratic institutions underpin relations among Indo-Pacific States.

Deputy Assistant Secretary Busby, I am deeply worried about—and my friend Mr. Sherman touched on this—deeply worried about China’s genocidal efforts to destroy the cultural identity of Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Mongolians. Are CCP efforts to repress and brainwash dissenters and ethnic minorities inspiring copycat programs elsewhere in the region? And how can the United States deter or punish implementation of these policies?

Mr. BUSBY. Thank you, Congresswoman, for that very good question. I do not think we have observed this elsewhere in the region. As Congressman Sherman indicated, yes, the Burmese Government has repressed and excluded the Rohingya. That has gone on for many, many years, and even predated the Chinese Government’s current posture toward the Uyghurs.

So we haven’t seen replication in the region. That said, we are steadfast in trying to push back on what the PRC is doing toward the Uyghurs. As I mentioned through statements, through sanctions, I should also note that through our engagement with business, we are seeking to try to demonstrate that U.S. business, international business should not benefit from engagement with any Chinese corporations implicated in the persecution of Uyghurs. And for that reason, we are precluding the import of goods made with forced labor in Xinjiang, and we are also precluding both the export of goods from U.S. companies to companies involved in Xinjiang as well as investment in those companies, as was made clear in the executive order that President Biden issued last week.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you.

Acting Assistant Secretary Thompson, how has China’s Belt and Road Initiative been used to export authoritarianism or road resistance to authoritarianism abroad, and how will the United States protect democracy in Belt and Road countries?

Mr. THOMPSON. Thanks for the question, Congresswoman. It is a very good point that one of the things that China is looking for through its Belt and Road Initiative is the kind of influence that would, promulgate their system or their ideas. And so we spend a lot of time working with countries to help them see the real malign influence that comes from being too closely aligned or engaged in this process.

We absolutely look to call out and identify any efforts, to draw these countries into, a debt trap relationship, to, to change their governing structures, anything like that. We also like to work with our civil society counterparts to make sure that they can help us spread that message, which can be more credible often coming from within inside a country than externally.

Mrs. WAGNER. I have brief time. I thank you for that answer.

We have a national interest in sustaining U.S. leadership in Southeast Asia and promoting respect for democratic freedoms and

articulating our strategic priorities, I think. This is why I introduced the Southeast Asia Strategy Act, which ensures that the United States engages proactively and meaningfully in this dynamic region. I am happy to say that the House has unanimously passed this legislation, and I am hopeful that the Senate will take swift action.

Deputy Assistant Secretary Busby, can you assess the health of democracy in Southeast Asia, and what is the U.S. plan to prevent democratic backsliding in our Southeastern Asian partners?

Mr. BUSBY. Thanks for the question, Congresswoman. Well, as I noted in my testimony, and my colleagues did as well, unfortunately, there has been democratic backsliding throughout the region, much like as we have seen throughout the world. And we are trying to push back on that by, first of all, demonstrating to the people and the governments in the region what the benefits of democracy are, and that is part of the reason President Biden has committed to holding a summit for democracies to show that democracies can deliver.

We are also trying to bolster the role of civil society throughout these countries, because we believe that independent civil society can call attention to human rights abuses, to corruption, can help hold governments accountable when they aren't addressing the needs of their people.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you.

I am way over my time. I appreciate the chair's indulgence, and I yield back. Thank you.

Mr. BERA. Thank you.

Let me go and recognize the gentlelady from Nevada, Ms. Titus.

Ms. TITUS. Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to the witnesses.

Just changing the subject a little bit, the unrest in Burma does not seem to be subsiding anytime soon, and regional diplomacy, I believe, is going to be crucial to bringing some resolution to the current conflict. And some countries in ASEAN have been very outspoken against the coup, but others and the association in general have offered more tepid responses or rebukes.

Now, I understand that the Five-Point Consensus Agreement from the Summit in April was a good start, but it is very vague, and it does not have any details about how ASEAN could enforce it. And you saw evidence of this earlier in the week when the Junta ignored the pleas from the ASEAN members to release the prisoners and they wouldn't engage in any dialog to bring peace to the country.

I wonder what our government, our State Department, is doing to sure up ASEAN or pressure some of those countries to be sure we are all working in concert and are committed to the efforts to bring some resolution to this conflict.

Mr. BUSBY. Francisco, why do not you take this one.

Mr. BENCOSME. Congresswoman thank you very much for the question.

Part of Deputy Secretary Sherman's recent visit to Southeast Asia was in part to signify U.S. leadership on making sure that ASEAN played a very constructive role in resolving the human rights crisis in Burma. Whether it was in Bangkok or in Cambodia

or Indonesia, she raised the need for both bilaterally and collectively as an institution for ASEAN to be firm and sort of holding up their fight consensus plan, as well as releasing prisoners like Aung San Suu Kyi and others.

I think that we agree with your assessment in terms of some of the challenges we have seen on sort of building that diplomatic pressure, but at the same time also think that the consensus was an important opportunity to show leadership on behalf of ASEAN. And I think that there are also countries in the region like Japan and Korea who are also stepping up to the plate.

Ms. TITUS. Well, I am glad to hear that because as we try to re-establish our position internationally, we are going to have to work with other organizations and former allies. We cannot go it alone. So I think that the new administration recognizes that and seems to be taking some steps in that direction based on what you said.

You mentioned—somebody did earlier—backsliding in some of these countries, democratic backsliding. We are seeing that everywhere, but one country I would like to ask about is Mongolia. That is the country we really need to be friends with, and they have been good partners. They have been moving toward democracy. They are holding Presidential elections now; but they are in a very dangerous neighborhood and a precarious position both politically and economically.

I wonder what the State Department and USAID are doing to engage Mongolian officials. Are we trying to reinforce Democratic resilience? Are we watching that election? Because there have been some parties within the country that have taken actions that might have undermined the democratic process.

I know the Desert Research Institute here in Nevada has a project there with the cloud seeding to deal with the snowstorms, and we are working with some of the women's groups on cashmere production; but that is just a small piece. What is the general policy, if you can address that?

Mr. BENCOSME. I am happy to take that question again, Congresswoman.

We have been very concerned about our recent developments in Mongolia. We have reiterated through our embassy that healthy major parties on both sides of the upcoming elections are important for democracy in Mongolia. At the same time, we do believe there is still a strong commitment to democracy and, that it is still within the U.S. strategic interest for Mongolia to be a stable and viable democracy.

And we have asked our counterparts to advocate that all issues of qualifications of candidates be made in accordance to Mongolian law but also international obligations in terms of human rights.

Ms. TITUS. It is harder and harder for us to maybe set the example for how elections should run. I am surprised some people haven't sent folks over here to observe our own, but at least we are trying to send the right message. So thank you for that.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. BERA. Thank you.

Let me go ahead and recognize the gentleman from Tennessee, Dr. Green.

Mr. GREEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and ranking member for holding this hearing today, and I want to thank our witnesses for being here.

I am out in my district, the rural part of my district, and so I thought I would take a little bit and share what their perspective is on democracy in the region, and it really mostly centers around what is going on with China.

You know, all too often I think we make the mistake that the people of China and the Chinese Communist Party or CCP are the same, but it is important to remember that the desire for freedom and a demand for self-reliance and human rights exists throughout much of the population of China. It is not so, of course, with the totalitarians of the CCP and, in particular, Xi Jinping.

President Xi has ushered in an unprecedented era of authoritarianism not seen since Mao's years, from tearing down crosses at churches and erecting his own image in their place, the cultural and ethnic genocide against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, Xi has gone beyond even Deng Xiaoping who was only a few years removed from Mao.

Let me take a moment and frame the mindset of the current CCP leadership in a historical context. After Tiananmen Square where hundreds, potentially thousands of protestors were massacred, President Bush sent former Secretary of State Kissinger on a secret mission to China. He observed, and I quote, "The Chinese leaders were stunned by the reaction of the outside world. They could not understand why the United States took umbrage at an event that had injured no American material interest," end quote. A party official told Kissinger again, quote, "We do not like to hear that others ask us what to do. Americans like to ask others do this or do that. The Chinese people do not want to yield to others," end quote.

Fast forward to when Nikki Haley was serving as Ambassador to the United Nations, confronted the Chinese delegates about the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. She essentially said that their leaders were shocked. We did not understand that these were just terrorists. They seemed to communicate a right to wipe the Uyghurs off the map for the acts of a few criminals and the world had no right to tell them what to do.

Now, the current communist emperor in China has made it clear they still do not want to be lectured on human rights, human dignity, and the value of freedom. But that does not mean we do not have options or an obligation to live within our values.

Recall after the holocaust the phrase "never again". The world can never again sit by and tolerate genocide. We acted in Rwanda, and we have an obligation to act now because never again is happening again in Xinjiang. The question, of course, is, what does that look like? Because while China asserts its Westphalian right to have no country medal in its internal affairs, the United States has a right, and I said above, an obligation, to choose with whom we do business and how we support our allies.

Militarize the manmade islands in the South China Sea against the findings of an international court, we have every right to navigate those seas. Conduct debt trap and wolf warrior diplomacy with our allies, well, we will work to reverse the economic freedoms that

we granted. Steal the intellectual property of our companies, we will continue to sue in court and create legislation and agreements which force China's hand.

Hack our defense systems to advance their own military buildup so through might they can continue their intimidation, well, we will shift forces to the Indo-Pacific, and we will build the advanced weapon systems with which no nation in the history of man has ever been able to compete. If they were so good at it, why would they steal ours.

The choice is and always has belonged to the leadership of the CCP. America worked to grow our relationship with China, and as the country opened up and stood up, to use Deng and Mao's own words, that improved relationship with us and our friends, along with a good bit of intellectual property debt, and, to be honest, a lot of hard work by industrious Chinese people has created an economic powerhouse. But the termination of the grace we gave, in light of the return to an authoritarian implementation of socialism and communism, is our right as well, and China should not be surprised by our response.

America has a right to choose how we interact with nations, behave responsibly and see a flourishing friendship. Wrongfully imprison an entire people group and, well, we are going to react. Create the lie that a pandemic started in a wet market from a pangolin that no one has found yet to hide a likely laboratory leak and your own culpability, well, do not be surprised when the rest of the world is pissed off and expecting some restitution for those losses.

The people of China should understand the new situation of a world standing up to the CCP is a result of their authoritarian actions, specifically the totalitarian leader of Xi Jinping. We want nothing more than a great relationship with the Chinese people. However, Xi's actions are deplorable, and they violate the very human right of freedom and self-determination, and the United States has every right to choose our partners based on their conduct and values.

My only questions of our witnesses today is, can you describe how Xi Jinping is different from his predecessors in regards to human rights and relations with the West?

Mr. BERA. And given that your time is expired, if someone wants to give a quick response.

Mr. GREEN. Thanks Mr. Chairman.

Mr. BUSBY. Let me respond quickly, Congressman. Thank you for that statement and that question.

We do believe that Xi Jinping has been more repressive than his predecessors. He has consolidated power in a way that hasn't occurred previously and in recent years and that the scale of the abuses has indeed increased under his rule.

You are absolutely right to point out that there is a difference between the Chinese Government, between the PPC—CCP rather, and the people of China. And President Biden and Secretary Blinken have not shied away from calling out Xi Jinping for his abuses against the Uyghurs and against others.

Mr. GREEN. Thank you.

Mr. BERA. Let me go and recognize the gentleman from Michigan, Mr. Levin.

Mr. LEVIN. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

I associate myself with Dr. Green's remarks and having been in [inaudible] On June 4, 1989, in—[audio malfunction] The oppression of the Uyghurs, the Tibetans, and others is just—all the way to Hong Kong is just horrifying.

But let me start by talking about

[audio malfunction] Who was detained on May 24, he is the managing editor of the News Outlet from Myanmar. He has been on the Reality of Life in Burma after the February 1 military coup,

[audio malfunction] A dangerous yet essential job that journalists are doing at unwarranted risk to themselves, but

[audio malfunction] Secretary Blinken

[audio malfunction] To bring Danny home, something that has just got to happen immediately.

I understand that folks here today aren't from the State Consular Affairs team so may not be able to speak directly

[inaudible] Related to this case, but I want to use this opportunity to share my thanks and to ask you to continue doing everything you can to get him home safely as soon as possible.

Mr. Busby and Mr. Bencosme, can one of you share in specific terms what the Administration is doing to address the danger journalists are facing in Burma and ensure those who are detained are released unconditionally?

Mr. BUSBY. Let me start and then turned it over to Francisco.

Mr. LEVIN. Somebody? My time is ticking.

Mr. BUSBY. Yes. Let me begin by saying generally we are trying to support independent journalists as much as we possibly can. The environment right now is a very tough one for them, but we have programs that support independent journalism, and diplomatically we are also speaking out in defense of journalists.

That said, those who are trying to get out of Burma because they think the danger is too great, we are also doing our best to protect them.

Let me turn it over to Francisco for details on the particular case of your constituent that you raise, Congressman.

Mr. BENCOSME. Thank you, Congressman.

The welfare and safety of U.S. citizens is one of the highest priorities that we have here in the U.S. Government. We have both raised consistently at high levels the military regimes to release both Daniel Fenster and Nathan Maung and other American journalists immediately and will continue to do so until they are allowed to return home safely to their families.

As you alluded, consular officers have sought to visit Daniel, but have been thus far been unafforded access to him by military officials, and so we will continue to ask the Burmese military for consular access as required by the Vienna Convention on consular wishes without delay.

Thank you.

[Audio malfunction.]

Mr. BERA. Andy, are you still there?

Mr. LEVIN. All right. Let me turn to—pardon? Yes. Can you hear me?

Mr. BERA. We can—it seems like you have a bad connection, so—

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. Chair——

Mr. BERA. Andy, it seems like we have got a bad connection.

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. Chair——

Mr. BERA. You are going in and out, so try and ask a question.

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. Chairman?

Mr. BERA. Andy, can you hear us?

Mr. BERA. Maybe the staff can work on Mr. Levin's——

Mr. LEVIN. All right. You can hear me, though?

[audio malfunction]

Mr. BERA. Why do not we have the staff work on Mr. Levin's connection, and let's go on to the next member, the gentleman from Kentucky, Mr. Barr.

Mr. BARR. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thanks to our witnesses for your testimony today.

Let me start with Advisor Bencosme. And am I pronouncing that right, Mr. Bencosme?

Mr. BENCOSME. You are correct, Congressman.

Mr. BARR. Thank you very much. And thank you for your service and testimony where you rightly point out that the PRC continues to undermine Hong Kong's autonomy and civil liberties despite its obligations under the joint declaration and international law.

And my question to you is about the Biden Administration's policy specifically related to Hong Kong. What is the Administration's policy in response to China's violation of international law and antidemocratic aggression in Hong Kong? You testified that we will examine all available policy tools to promote accountability for the Beijing and Hong Kong officials responsible.

Also, the Administration issued a document, the interim security strategy guidance, and in that document the Biden Administration committed to working alongside allies to, quote, stand up for democracy and human rights in Hong Kong. I applaud the Administration for those statements, but can you give me some more specifics? What is the policy specifically to support pro democracy activists in Hong Kong?

And given Hong Kong's authorities against opposition figures and Beijing's tightening control of Hong Kong's elective bodies, is Hong Kong a lost cause or what is it we can do to respond to Chinese aggression there?

Mr. BENCOSME. Thank you for that question. I will start off and then maybe turn to PDAS Busby in case I forgot anything.

But I think you are absolutely right that our strategy and lines of reference includes, one, increasing partners and allies condemning the recent actions in sort of degrading the autonomy in Hong Kong. That includes getting countries like the U.K., European partners, as well as Canada and others to really speak out against human rights abuses in Hong Kong.

And second, it also means imposing costs for abusers, whether they be Chinese or Hong Kong officials. So, for example, earlier this year we imposed sanctions on individuals and making sure that they do not continue to act with impunity.

And, third, whenever possible, supporting activists and the Hong Kong people whether it is through civil society support or through those who are trying to flee, through the closet of natural security law.

So I will turn it over to Deputy Busby if he has anything to add.
Mr. BUSBY. Nothing to add. Francisco, I think you covered it well.

Mr. BARR. Yes. Thanks to both of you. And the sanction piece I think is important, supporting civil society. Supporting those opposition figures in Hong Kong is important. I do hope there is a future for a peaceful political opposition in Hong Kong, and I hope it is not a lost cause.

Let me turn to Taiwan. We do not want what happened in Hong Kong and the national security law there to happen to Taiwan. The lifting of the restrictions on port imports from the United States was seen as a good faith step by the Taiwanese to work toward a more comprehensive trade deal with the United States. Secretary Blinken confirmed with me yesterday that indeed the Biden Administration and trade representative Thai will be working toward perhaps a bilateral agreement there. The CCP would obviously not want to see a bilateral trade deal between the United States and Taiwan.

Are we seeing the CCP attempting to influence the upcoming referendum on the restrictions on port imports, are we seeing the CCP attempt to influence that? Are we seeing the CCP attempting to undermine the potential for trade talks?

Mr. BUSBY. I personally do not know the answer to that, Congressman. We will need to get back to you. I can say that the CCP definitely sought to influence the recent Presidential elections in Taiwan, and we worked closely with the authorities in Taiwan to help them push back against that, and they did so more successfully than many other governments in the world have done.

Mr. BARR. Thank you.

And real quick, Dean Thompson, do our export/import bank and Development Finance Corporation, do they have access to intel to better counter belt and road? Do they have access to the intel on countering those investments with investments of their own?

Mr. THOMPSON. Congressman, thank you for the question.

I believe they do, and we work very closely with them to look at ways to leverage what they can bring to the table, both in terms of direct financing, as well as leveraging other capital that may be out there.

Mr. BARR. I think DFC and AXM are important tools in countering belts and roads.

Thank you for your indulgence, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. BERA. Great. Thank you.

I have a message that Mr. Levin is back. Andy, can you check your audio?

Mr. LEVIN. Yes. Can you hear me, Ami?

Mr. BERA. Great. So let's go and give you 2 minutes back if you want.

Mr. LEVIN. Thanks so much, Mr. Chairman. Very sorry about that.

In Bangladesh, almost 10 years after the Rana Plaza disaster, we are seeing challenges to unions. The landmark Accord on Fire Safety and Building—Fire and Building safety is in danger of unraveling, and U.S. companies never even joined it.

My first trip abroad as a Member of Congress was to Bangladesh, where I talked to workers and union organizers about the challenges they face, as well as going to the Rohingya refugee camps. More than 4.5 million people work in 4,500 garment facilities, making Bangladesh the second largest garment exporter in the world after China. According to the New York Times, under the Fire and Safety Building Accord, more than 120,000 fire, building, and electrical hazards were fixed. Nearly 200 factories with 2 million workers lost their contracts because of poor safety standards after more than 38,000 inspections.

Mr. Busby and Mr. Thompson, will this administration work with me to support Bangladesh workers' freedoms to form unions and to extend and expand specifically what is arguably the most effective worker safety agreement ever achieved since the dawn of the global antisweatshop movement in the 1990's?

Mr. BUSBY. Let me start by just saying, Congressman, thank you for the question, first of all, and we are absolutely committed to working with you to protect and promote worker rights in Bangladesh.

Over to Dean Thompson for more details.

Mr. THOMPSON. Thank you.

Let me just echo, absolutely, we would look forward to that and, we are very engaged in working with not just ourselves, amongst ourselves at the U.S. Government but with like-minded partners in the ILO to work with unions and other forces in Bangladesh that are looking to bring change. And we will continue to do that and look forward to the opportunity as you have described it.

Mr. LEVIN. Okay. But I am asking for a specific answer to my question on the Accord on Fire and Building Safety, which negotiations have been extended. Will the United States commit to work with me on that?

Mr. THOMPSON. Yes, sir.

Mr. BUSBY. Yes, sir, absolutely.

Mr. LEVIN. Okay. Thank you.

Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Sorry for the technical difficulties.

Mr. BERA. Great. Let me now go ahead and recognize the gentlelady from Pennsylvania, Ms. Houlahan.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Thank you, Mr. Chair. And thank you all for being here today.

My first question is for Mr. Thompson. In the United States and India are the worlds two largest democracies, and as a consequence, I believe that we are uniquely poised to join forces in promoting a democratic system and democratic values in the Indo-Pacific region specifically and probably beyond.

My question for Mr. Thompson is, would you agree with that? And, if so, what kinds of initiatives is the Administration intending to pursue or already pursuing to be able to pair those two great democracies with one another?

Mr. THOMPSON. Thanks, Congresswoman.

It is a great point and one we absolutely agree with in terms of the vast possibilities of our relationship with India. As I mentioned earlier, we have a global comprehensive strategic partnership with India. We are looking at ways to both strengthen India's ability to be a positive player and influencer throughout the region, and

when you bring in the Quad member countries as well, the Quad relationship is extremely important because of the ASEAN centrality and the vast regional reach that it has for us to be able to bring these kind of democratic ideals across the board.

I would also note that our ability to leverage each other's assistance programs and, complement one another where relationships may be stronger between us and a country versus India and a country, or vice versa, there is a great, leveraging opportunity there.

So I will leave it there. Perhaps Craig or someone else might have something.

Ms. HOULAHAN. I actually have a little bit of a follow on question as well, which is, although, of course, we have two great democracies, including ours and India's, they are not without their flaws and problems. And I do have a pretty big Kashmir population in my community, and there is, of course, concern about the treatment of the Kashmir people.

What is the dialog that is ongoing between the Administration and the Indian Government on these human rights issues broadly if you could share a little bit there?

Mr. THOMPSON. Yes, Congresswoman, happily.

You know, the Administration routinely raises issues related to a vast array of rights and democratic issues with India. Kashmir is one area where we have urged them to return to normalcy as quickly as possible, including we have seen some steps taken in release of prisoners, the restoration of 4G internet access, things of that nature. There are other electoral steps we would like to see them take and that we have encouraged them to do and will continue to do so.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Thank you.

And for the remainder of the of my time, for Mr. Busby, I have a question that relates to protests that are, of course, ongoing around the world. Whether it is Hong Kong or Thailand or Burma, we are seeing a lot of people, particularly young people and especially women, leading the charge and pushing for reforms in many of these nations.

What can the United States be doing to help support those young people and, particularly, women who are engaged in these political movements? And can we do so without feeding into the narratives that these movements are facilitated by our foreign interference?

Mr. BUSBY. Thank you for the question, Congresswoman.

First of all, you probably heard the Secretary indicate our steadfast support for the right of peaceful assembly, and we articulate our commitment to that right and that others should respect that right whenever these types of protests occur.

As you rightly note, standing by and supporting the youth of these countries is very important. We continue to support the YSEALI program in Asia which involves engagement with the young people of that region to expose them to America and American values. We have a similar program with young African leaders. So that is one way of maintaining our engagement and support for young people who are engaging in these sorts of activities.

And then as to women, we continue to have women-specific programs, programs that are devoted to women's empowerment, as

well as programs to promote and protect women's rights. And, indeed, we continue to have an office specifically devoted to women's issues here at the State Department that is focused on these issues.

Ms. HOULAHAN. And we would love very much in my office to work with you on those issues, in particular.

[inaudible]

And with that, I appreciate your time, gentlemen, and I yield back.

Mr. BERA. Great. Let me go ahead and recognize the gentleman from California, Mr. Lieu.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you, Chairman Bera, for holding this important, hearing and thank you to our witnesses for your public service and your time today.

I would like to followup on Representative Sherman's questions about Burma. First of all, what the military did in Burma was wrong. They should be removed from power and doing a coup is completely unacceptable.

My questions relate to the relatively newly formed National Unity Government in opposition to this military coup. I note that prior to this military coup, the Government of Burma was essentially doing what the U.N. called having genocidal intent in slaughtering the Rohingya, sexual assaults of the Rohingya, brutalizing the Rohingya. A number of these very same members of that government are now part of the National Unity Government. I am disappointed they refuse to recognize the citizenship of the Rohingya, but I am also really troubled they do not even have a representative of the Rohingya in this National Unity Government.

So my question to Mr. Bencosme is, is the U.S. or has the U.S. recognized this National Unity Government yet?

Mr. BENCOSME. Thank you for that question, Congressman Lieu.

The U.S. has met with the National Unity Government as part of its outreach to civil society in response to the coup. We continue to support, democracy forces inside the country, as well as those who are fleeing. But on the question of recognition, we have not made a decision.

Mr. LIEU. I request that we not recognize this National Unity Government until they commit to having a representative of the Rohingya in their National Unity Government.

And I just note that this is one of the darkest days of despair for them. They are out of power and exiled. They may never get back, and even during these very dark days, they still cannot manage to say they will give citizenship to the Rohingya. They still cannot manage to have a representative of Rohingya in their government. Imagine what they are going to do if they ever get back in power.

I am going to tell you what they are going to do. They are going to do the same thing they did before, which is slaughter the Rohingya with genocidal intent. That is what they did before this coup. That is what they are going to do afterwards because they have made zero, zero commitments to not do that in terms of having citizenship and having a representative of the Rohingya.

So I request the State Department not to recognize them and be very forceful in demanding these changes. And as Representative

Mark Green said, never again. I hope the State Department honors that thought.

My next question is to Secretary Thompson. It is about Pakistan. At a prior hearing of House Foreign Affairs Committee, there was a hearing on Afghanistan. It was brought up how important Pakistan was to the future of Afghanistan. And my question to you is, the State Department recognizes that Pakistan is a critical ally of the United States. Is that correct?

Mr. THOMPSON. Yes, sir.

Mr. LIEU. So I just am curious because I asked this question at the prior hearing. I did not get a very good answer to it. There was a Climate Summit earlier this year where there was a meeting of 40 world leaders. They got exclusive invitations, and the leaders of India and Bangladesh were invited to this exclusive meeting with the President, and Pakistan was not invited to that exclusive meeting, even though, according to the Global Climate Change Risk Index, Pakistan is fifth in terms of being most vulnerable to climate change. And when we look at the list of 40 countries, Pakistan was basically bigger than about 35 of those countries that were invited to this exclusive meeting with President Biden.

So I am just wondering, what was the thinking there of excluding the leader of Pakistan from that meeting?

Mr. THOMPSON. Thanks Congressman.

I can speak a little bit to this but may have to take the question to get you a more fulsome answer if I can. But my understanding is the invitations for the summit itself were primarily among the largest emitters and that Pakistan did not fall into that category but that there was an opportunity then for leaders from several other countries to sort of have a discussion about the issues as a way of broadening that discussion.

That was sort of the extent I was involved with it. I am happy to try and get more information for you.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you.

I do not think it is actually true in terms of emitters because there were much smaller countries that emitted far less that were also invited to this meeting.

And I just want to close by saying the State Department just needs to be sensitive to potential snubs. You cannot just sort of invite the leader of India and Bangladesh to a meeting with the President but not the leader of Pakistan. They are just not going to take it the right way. That is one reason we have the State Department so that we do not have these kind of snubs happen diplomatically.

With that, I yield back.

Mr. BERA. Thank you.

Let me go and recognize the gentlelady from Virginia, Ms. Spanberger.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. To our witnesses, thank you for being here. I truly appreciate your time.

My question today is really focused on freedom of the press, which is something that we have discussed specific to particular journalists so far. But, recognizing that freedom of the press is really foundational to the protection of human rights and to democracy and since we have seen since COVID and the pandemic has

begun that there really is an importance of objective reporting in public health as an example, and when freedom of the press is hampered, so is the ability of everyday citizens to separate facts from fiction and navigate an increasing presence of misinformation and disinformation.

But across the world, there are many countries where it does remain very dangerous to be a journalist, and this is particularly concerning to me as we see the journalists around the world are literally facing increasing crackdowns and constraints, and we have seen this in South Asia in particular,

So Mr. Busby, Mr. Thompson, I was wondering, could you please provide an assessment of freedom of the press in countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, for example, and what threats to journalists, individuals may be facing or experiencing there or elsewhere in the region?

Mr. BUSBY. Thank you, Congresswoman, for the question.

We couldn't agree more on the importance of free and independent press, and we indeed speak out in favor of free and independent press wherever there are threats to freedom of the press, and we also have a variety of programs, some of which the State Department administers and some of which USAID administers, dedicated to freedom of the press.

I would note that a couple of years ago the U.K. started something called the Media Freedom Coalition specifically designed to address threats to press freedom, and we are working very closely with the U.K. in speaking out in individual cases as well as supporting journalists generally around the world who are threatened.

Let me turn it over to Dean now for a specific analysis of the South Central Asia region.

Mr. THOMPSON. Thanks, Scott, and thank you for the question, Congresswoman.

It remains, as Scott said, an area we watch very closely and, in fact, work with many different journalism groups to try to continue to promote freedom of the press, freedom of expression in all of the countries in the region.

It is a little hard to give you one answer because each country has some different issues. Certainly we have been concerned in Pakistan and Bangladesh with regard to some of the restrictions on journalists that have been there. Similarly, at times that has happened in India, though I think India we can say has a very vibrant press overall that reports very freely on its government.

But just getting back to the specifics of what we do, I think that, with our colleagues from USAID, with our colleagues from DRL, we are always looking for ways to build the capacity and ability of journalists to report and broaden the knowledge base, if you will, of the citizenry.

As you rightfully noted, COVID has been a tremendous example of where information is critically important and access to information has to be protected.

Ms. SPANBERGER. And challenges that may or may not be impacting the press, do you see any particular problems that those present for you all as it relates predominantly to diplomacy in communicating our message, our values, our purpose in engaging? Are

there any challenges that, from an American perspective, facing out you may see in terms of issues related to a free press overseas?

Mr. THOMPSON. Scott, if it is OK, maybe I will start that.

I would say that it can be an issue, of course, if you are dealing with a country that has a restrictive press environment, and in which case we will look for alternate ways to get our message across and a broad number of ways.

So, there may be government outlets. There may be private outlets. There may be social media opportunities. We are quite interested in looking at where are the people looking for news and where are they getting their information and how can we take that to them in a number of different ways, whatever the media might be.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Thank you very much. And I am almost out of time, so I appreciate your last comment.

Certainly in our other subcommittees we have heard from journalists in other parts of the world, in other regions where people do really get creative in how they disseminate information and ensure that good quality information is out there in other places as well.

So thank you for your answers.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. BERA. Great. Thank you for that.

And I know—I think we lost Mr. Chabot to technical issues. So with that, I am going to go ahead and make some closing remarks.

And, again, want to thank the witnesses for, your public service and your continued work to uphold our democratic values in the region. And, I think this subcommittee, as well as Members of Congress as you have heard today, want to work in a bipartisan way with the Administration to strengthen those values.

And I know when I think about the region and think about the great power competition of China, I often think about it in terms of, obviously, there is an economic competition, influence competition, but there is a competition of values. And the more we can do to strengthen our relationship with like-minded allies and like-valued allies, such as some of the initiatives with the Quad and some of the conversations taking place, to set the rules of norms, there is a competition of those values here in the 21st century. And I think it is pertinent to the people of the world that democratic values, free market values, the human rights that come with that actually win the day.

So, again, thank you for your work in these areas. We look forward to working with each of you as we move those values forward.

And with that, I will bring this hearing to a close, and the meeting is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:44 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

**SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128**

Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation

Ami Bera (D-CA), Chair

June 4, 2021

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held virtually by the Subcommittee on the Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation via Cisco WebEx (and available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>):

DATE: Wednesday, June 9, 2021

TIME: 11:00 a.m., EDT

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

WITNESSES: Mr. Scott Busby
Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
U.S. Department of State

Mr. Craig Hart
Acting Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator for East Asia and the Pacific
U.S. Agency for International Development

Mr. Dean Thompson
Acting Assistant Secretary
Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs
U.S. Department of State

Mr. Francisco Bencosme
Senior Advisor to the Acting Assistant Secretary
East Asian and Pacific Affairs Bureau
U.S. Department of State

By Direction of the Chair

To fill out this form online, either use the tab key to travel through each field or mouse click each line or within blue box. Type in information.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Note: Red boxes with red type will NOT print.

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation HEARING

Day Wednesday Date June 9, 2021 Room Cisco WebEx

Starting Time 11:06 am Ending Time 12:44 pm

Recesses 0 (to) (to)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman Ami Bera

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session

Executive (closed) Session

Televised

Electronically Recorded (taped)

Stenographic Record

To select a box, mouse click it, or tab to it and use the enter key to select. Another click on the same box will deselect it.

TITLE OF HEARING:

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

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

See attached.

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: (Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes No
(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

Yes

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)

*SFR - Bera
SFR - Connolly
QFR - Young Kim*

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or TIME ADJOURNED 12:44 pm

Clear Form

Note: If listing additional witnesses not included on hearing notice, be sure to include title, agency, etc.

Rachael Miller
Subcommittee Staff Associate

WHEN COMPLETED: Please print for subcommittee staff director's signature and make at least one copy of the signed form. A signed copy is to be included with the hearing/markup transcript when ready for printing along with a copy of the final meeting notice (both will go into the appendix). The signed original, with a copy of the final meeting notice attached, goes to full committee. An electronic copy of this PDF file may be saved to your hearing folder, if desired.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE PACIFIC, CENTRAL ASIA, AND NONPROLIFERATION
 ATTENDANCE

<i>PRESENT</i>	<i>MEMBER</i>
X	Ami Bera, CA
X	Brad Sherman, CA
X	Dina Titus, NV
X	Andy Levin, MI
X	Chrissy Houlahan, PA
X	Andy Kim, NJ
X	Gerald E. Connolly, VA
X	Ted Lieu, CA
X	Abigail Spanberger, VA
X	Kathy Manning, NC

<i>PRESENT</i>	<i>MEMBER</i>
X	Steve Chabot, OH
	Scott Perry, PA
X	Ann Wagner, MO
X	Ken Buck, CO
	Tim Burchett, TN
X	Mark Green, TN
X	Andy Barr, KY
	Young Kim, CA

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD FROM REPRESENTATIVE
CONNOLLY

**“Democratic Values in the Indo-Pacific in an Era of Strategic Competition”
HFAC Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation**

11:00 AM, Wednesday, June 9, 2021

Cisco WebEx

Rep. Gerald E. Connolly (D-VA)

As an avowed opponent of liberal democracy, Chinese aggression and attacks on democratic institutions have made the Indo-Pacific region the focal point of global geopolitics. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) is in active pursuing their goal of becoming the world’s leading superpower, violently suppressing human rights and opposition voices along the way. Our competition with China is increasingly being drawn along those lines, making our international alliances like NATO and bonds with regional democracies ever more critical. North Korea continues to threaten South Korea and Japan with their persistent efforts to obtain a nuclear weapon. India was recently downgraded by Freedom House from a “free democracy” to a “partially free democracy.” Hong Kong’s protests in support of democracy are violently oppressed and their leadership put in jail. The military junta continues to control Burma, despite ongoing protests against their rule. We can’t afford to let these trends continue or allow China’s influence to grow. As the COVID-19 pandemic puts severe strain on countries’ economic and political systems, exacerbating an already worrying trend away from democracy, we must refocus our efforts to strengthen democratic systems of governance.

Upholding and defending democratic values is a cornerstone of a secure and prosperous country. As President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, I have made promoting democracy my top priority for my tenure by proposing the formation of the Democratic Resilience Center at NATO, an institution which would serve as a resource for challenges to the common values shared by member states. It would provide advice and assistance on election integrity and security, judicial independence, press freedom, and other issues important to maintaining a vibrant democracy. It would further demonstrate that NATO is much more than a military bloc – we are an alliance of nations with a shared set of ideals and values. This model, once adopted, could serve as a guide for other alliances, such as those in the Indo-Pacific, to promote democratic values in every corner of the globe.

Until then, it is critical that the United States continue to support and defend our allies in the Indo-Pacific region against threats to their democracy. One such longstanding ally and vibrant democracy is Taiwan. China’s increasingly hostile actions against Taiwan have further strained Cross Strait relations. For more than 40 years, I have been a proud friend to and defender of Taiwan. I worked on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when the Taiwan Relations Act was drafted, and now have the honor of Co-Chairing the Congressional Taiwan Caucus with my friend Mr. Chabot. Together, we recently re-introduced the Taiwan International Solidarity Act (H.R. 2646) which clarifies that the TAIPEI Act of 2019 made no commentary on Taiwan’s status and did not convey sovereignty over Taiwan to China. I look forward to seeing this legislation considered by this Committee and signed into law soon. I have also made numerous statements and co-sponsored legislation defending Taiwan’s right to regain observer status in the World Health Organization (WHO), particularly considering the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taiwan is by no means the only country in the Indo-Pacific that needs our support. On February 1, the military seized control of Burma, detaining the democratically elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Burmese citizens have bravely taken to the streets and been brutally murdered protesting the military junta's rule and demanding a return to the democracy they fought so hard to obtain. In February, I introduced the Protect Democracy in Burma Act of 2021 (H.R. 1112), which requires the State Department to report to Congress on U.S. efforts to engage with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to support a return to Burma's democratic transition and to influence the United Nations to hold those responsible for the coup accountable. One month later, this bill passed the House unanimously, underscoring the widespread agreement in the United States Congress that we must do everything in our power to force the military to cede control back to the government elected by the Burmese people.

Finally, as chair of the Korea Caucus, I know how critical it is that we continue to reinforce our relationship with South Korea, not only to counter Chinese efforts, but North Korea's persistent nuclear ambitions as well. Ahead of President Moon's recent visit to the White House, I re-introduced the Partner with Korea Act (H.R. 3382), which will provide 15,000 high-skilled visas to South Korean nationals and build on our existing Free Trade Agreement with South Korea. Passing this legislation will be a definitive signal to China and North Korea that we unequivocally stand by our allies and underscore the benefits associated with support for democracy and democratic ideals.

However, American efforts to support these values in the Indo-Pacific will likely be to little avail unless and until we adequately counter China militarily and oppose their widespread human rights violations. China's military actions in the region are a threat to all democratic allies. Beijing's unlawful activities and assertiveness in the South and East China Seas not only jeopardize regional peace and stability but also pose a direct challenge to international law and norms. Japan is being forced to constantly repel Chinese incursion into the waters around the Senkaku Islands, despite their unquestionable sovereignty. We must work with existing networks of allies and partners to push back on China's territorial and sovereignty claims.

As to their human rights record, since 2016, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has detained over a million Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities in "re-education centers," where they are subjected to food deprivation, beatings, and sexual abuse. Many are also held in forced labor camps, completely cut off from all contact with relatives and loved ones. I welcomed President Biden's executive order which prohibits investments in Chinese defense and surveillance firms that manufacture and use technology to facilitate human rights abuses, but I don't believe it's enough to force China to change their ways on either issue, and more must be done.

Left unchecked, China poses a grave threat to rules-based international order. The United States and our allies must double-down on existing efforts to support like-minded nations in the Indo-Pacific to ensure that their democratic values can flourish and stand up against Beijing's influence. I am eager to use my position in Congress to support this noble effort.

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Questions for the Record from Representative Young Kim
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and
Nonproliferation
“Democratic Values in the Indo-Pacific in an Era of Strategic Competition”
June 9, 2021

Question:

“Mr. Bencosme, can you describe the efforts EAP is engaging in to promote and achieve tangible results on in regard to improving the human rights situation in North Korea?”

Answer:

Mr. Bencosme: EAP, alongside the rest of the Biden-Harris Administration, is putting human rights back at the center of our foreign policy, including in North Korea, and we are united with like-minded partners in calling out human rights abuses and violations. The DPRK is among the most repressive authoritarian states in the world. Its human rights situation is appalling. We will continue to work with the international community to raise awareness, highlight abuses and violations, increase access to independent information, and promote respect for human rights in the DPRK.

Question:

“Mr. Hart, can you shed light on the current humanitarian situation on the ground in North Korea? Especially as it compares between the more rural areas and Pyongyang?”

Answer:

Mr. Hart: The humanitarian situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has deteriorated since the DPRK closed its borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic in January 2020. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated 10.6 million people in need of humanitarian assistance including 2.67 million children as of June 2021. While the humanitarian situation had improved slightly pre-pandemic, critical needs remain in food security, nutrition, health, and water, sanitation, and hygiene, and have been compounded by the impacts of COVID-19.

In June, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) released a report on food security, which estimates that there is a food shortage in DPRK equivalent to nearly 2.5 months of food use. Without food imports or foreign aid, FAO warns that households could experience a deterioration of food security between August and October. The DPRK also remains vulnerable to natural disasters, particularly droughts and floods, exacerbated by existing critical needs.

COVID-19-related restrictions have severely limited humanitarian presence and activities in-country, including movement outside Pyongyang. International humanitarian staff have departed DPRK, and international organizations are supporting local staff remotely. Due to access limitations, the humanitarian community is unable to assess the full impact of COVID-19 and the overall humanitarian situation, including potential disparities between urban and rural populations. The DPRK officially maintains a statistic of zero in-country COVID-19 cases. Additionally, the DPRK has been allocated approximately 1.7 million doses under COVAX;

however, no doses have been delivered to date. DPRK has not completed the requirements for accepting COVAX Advanced Market Commitment donation; they fulfilled most requirements but have not completed the indemnity and liability for vaccines offered.

Question:

“Secretary Thompson, China has strong incentives to avoid chaos in Burma to maintain its economic and strategic interests in the region, but it also views the country as a battleground for preventing the encroachment of democratic values and Western interests in its backyard. How can the U.S. engage with civil society leaders in Burma to fortify democratic values and institutions in the country?”

Answer:

Secretary Thompson: The United States will continue our longstanding support for civil society actors in Burma. This is vital in the face of the military coup in February, through which the military has attempted to overturn the will of the people as expressed in Burma’s November 2020 elections. We will continue to make clear to the international community that the coup is destabilizing for the entire region.

We will continue to support Burma’s pro-democracy movement, ethnic and religious communities, and others through strong diplomatic engagement and provision of foreign assistance to empower them as they work to restore Burma’s democratic transition. In addition, the United States will continue to encourage our partners, allies, and others to engage representatives of the pro-democracy movement, including in international organizations and major international events, and to deny the military regime international credibility.

Mr. Hart: USAID’s priority in Burma is the restoration of democracy. Our near-term objectives are: 1) restore democratic space, human rights, and accountability via civil society, independent media, and investing in Burma’s future leaders; 2) support the people of Burma to meet ongoing and emerging needs for access to humanitarian assistance (HA) and essential services (in coordination with State/PRM); and 3) counter the military’s and China’s role in the economy. Even before the February coup d’etat, USAID worked closely with Burma’s civil society organizations (CSO) and leaders, and other actors to strengthen democratic values and institutions in Burma. USAID’s work with political parties, activists, and civil society ensured more than 70 percent of eligible voters participated in the November 2020 elections—a higher turnout than in Burma’s first democratic elections of 2015.

After the coup, USAID quickly redirected more than \$42 million away from existing bilateral programs that could have benefitted the military junta’s institutions and pivoted these funds to increase our work with CSOs and their leadership to counter the undemocratic forces attacking Burma’s democratic people and institutions. Across all sectors of our work in Burma, we are increasing our investments in Burma’s next generation of leaders to advance a free and open society and equip them to push for democratic institutions and processes. USAID projects were adapted to save lives and protect the dignity and human rights of the people of Burma.

Our support for civil society is empowering independent voices to continue to press for respect for human rights, a future that includes inclusive and equitable governance, and ending impunity

for the military for their actions against numerous ethnic populations, including Rohingya, Shan, Rakhine, Chin Karen, and Kachin civilians. USAID continues to support independent media and the public service provided by Burma's journalists.

Envisioned as a program to enhance and build a cadre of future leaders for Burma even before the coup, USAID/Burma's Lincoln Scholars U.S. graduate scholarship program continues despite the coup and is now all the more important to Burma's future civilian leadership. Focused on improving the technical competencies and enhancing the leadership potential of Burma's next generation of leaders, this scholarship program will send 100 scholars total over five years to the U.S. for their Masters Degrees. The first 14 of a cohort of 17 scholars left for various US universities in August of 2020 and the next cohort are expected to start in August 2021.