

## SUNNYLANDS JOINT STATEMENT

The Sunnylands Initiative was established in January 2020 to advance a vision for cooperation on strengthening democratic governance norms in the Indo-Pacific region. Recognizing a lack of regional infrastructure to defend freedom, human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and an international rules-based order, thought leaders from Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Samoa, Taiwan, Timor-Leste, and the United States gathered on the lands of the Gayamagal People in Sydney, Australia, to reaffirm the [Sunnylands Principles](#) on Enhancing Democratic Partnership in the Indo-Pacific Region, and to launch action plans to pursue this vision of an Indo-Pacific region governed by respect for universal democratic values and standards.

Participants of the Sunnylands Initiative chose to hold this round of the Initiative in Australia to highlight the important role Australia has played in supporting governance, women's empowerment, and civil society, particularly through its development assistance. Our participants learned that some of the global pressures on democratic governance they see are occurring even here. Australian Home Affairs Minister Clare O'Neil recently [declared](#) that democracy "is our biggest national asset," yet "competitor countries are seeking to undermine our democracy, and we need to fight back."

Australia is not alone in this undertaking. In March 2023, Asian partners gathered in Seoul for a second Summit for Democracy focused on anti-corruption. We applaud the Republic of Korea for committing US\$100 million over three years in support of development projects contributing to democracy assistance. The summit in Seoul reinforced the importance of regional leadership on democracy and the importance of collaborative efforts. We encourage all governments to support and follow the Republic of Korea's leadership in implementing a more inclusive process in the 2024 Summit for Democracy, which will bolster Indo-Pacific stewardship of the democracy agenda. Their effort may include some new governments and must include broader civil society groups across the region.

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

As we approach the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this year marks an important milestone to reflect on the

progress made, and to work towards further progress in the twenty-five years to come.

In August 2022, when we last met in Odawara, Japan, and [agreed](#) to reinvigorate the spirit of democratic norms and universal values first articulated at Sunnylands in 2020, we did so in the wake of an assault on democratic norms and values across the world. These geopolitical tensions have brought to the fore both threats and opportunities for strengthening democracy. As we gather in Sydney, we view with deep concern developments in parts of the region that include increased targeting and jailing of political leaders and opposition voices; systemic violations of minority rights; the erosion of women's human rights; repression of civil society; attacks on media and freedom of expression; and growing polarization and disinformation eroding open societies. There remains an urgent need for all democracies to demonstrate that their system can effectively and sustainably deliver better outcomes for their citizens, and that their citizens have agency and are protected.

At the same time, however, there is reason for cautious optimism.

Democracy is a process, not an endpoint. Despite nearly two decades of democratic backsliding with steps both forwards and backwards, there are promising green shoots for democracy in the Indo-Pacific. Amid a global slowing of what was once a rapid deterioration of rights and freedoms, the latest Freedom House research indicates that levels of freedom in the Indo-Pacific slightly improved in 2022.

Existing efforts by Indo-Pacific nations in support of democracy and good governance in the region are considerable. Australia's development and election assistance to Pacific Island nations remains more sizeable than any other nation's. Japan has become a critical regional leader for supporting legal and judicial reform, good governance, and capacity building across the Indo-Pacific. India is now a regional hub for electoral training programs and remains one of the world's largest donors to the UN Democracy Fund. Indonesia's championing of democracy within ASEAN and annual intergovernmental Bali Democracy Forum proved integral to the promotion of good governance in the region. Despite challenges of democratic governance within key ASEAN states, the group retains potential to be an integrator of key approaches to supporting human rights and democracy.

South Korea's relatively recent commitment to supporting democracy in the region has seen it make unprecedented bilateral and multilateral efforts. Taiwan's technical assistance in the region remains robust while the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy has proved to be a critical convener of civil society actors across the Indo-Pacific. In the face of dramatic unrest and economic challenges, Timor-Leste can now pride itself on maintaining an independent media and civil society amid multiple peaceful transitions of power. Many young democracies in the Pacific Islands are in the process of making democracy their own by incorporating their traditional systems of governance with universal democratic values, highlighting a core tenet of the Sunnylands Principles that *democracy is diverse*.

We meet at a time when more governments are doing more than ever before to support democratic governance. The emergence of the [Indo-Pacific Platform for Universal Values](#) indicates important progress, as does the Japanese government's support for universal values in its 2022 National Security Strategy and 2023 Development Cooperation Charter. The Republic of Korea has committed to reflecting universal values in its overall foreign policy and emphasized human rights and the rule of law in its 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy. In 2023, Australia is due to launch a new International Development Policy, which will focus on supporting effective and accountable states and connecting regional partners with Australia, while its Home Affairs Minister has recently launched a Democracy Taskforce. The forthcoming Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Policy by the US Agency for International Development prioritizes expanded work to promote and defend press freedoms, a vibrant civil society, and other universal human rights.

Multilateral networks and institutions supporting democracy in the Indo-Pacific may be a relatively recent phenomenon, but they are nonetheless indispensable. Frameworks for intergovernmental and civil society efforts and networking — including ASEAN and its diverse partnerships and fora, the Quad, the Pacific Islands Forum, Bali Democracy Forum, and South-South and Triangular Cooperation — have had varied levels of commitment yet continue to provide important cross-border networks.

Together, these efforts are helping to foster the reality of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

## The Importance of the Pacific Islands

The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and the Biketawa Declaration by the Pacific Islands Forum set out Pacific Island nations' own vision for a coordinated regional effort towards common democratic values. Countries seeking to have inclusive and enduring partnerships with Pacific Island nations should consider this regionally-sought vision in their democratic engagement.

Recognizing that the Pacific Islands are diverse, both as a region and internally, any initiative for supporting democracy in the region must respect principles of regional solidarity, inclusiveness, and Blue Pacific values. Donor nations should engage in a consultative process that responds to the opportunities unique to each nation's own context and respects the fundamental threats to the region posed by climate change, historical legacies of nuclear testing, colonialism, and other issues. While there are governance challenges, we are encouraged by the emergence of these states as democracies since their independence. The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Commonwealth Secretariat have convened on democratic issues in the past. Supporters of the Pacific Islands across the region should contribute to a renewed effort in this regard.

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong has [reiterated](#) that Australia has a “longstanding and historical commitment to supporting democracy and democratic processes” in the Pacific Islands, though the challenge to democracies — ranging from weak governance to malign foreign influence — remains acute, despite recent successful gains by states such as Samoa and Fiji. Australia remains the largest donor in this region, with strong cultural and societal links. Its continued leadership will be strengthened by a renewed emphasis on democratic governance.

Other nations in the Indo-Pacific are also committed to strengthening democratic governance in the Pacific Islands. Japan has announced a major funding agreement supporting the institutional strengthening of legislatures in six Pacific Island nations. The United States is expanding the presence of the Peace Corps, Luce and Fulbright fellows, and civil society groups.

## The Third Sunnylands Initiative Action Plans

The 25 participants at the Sunnylands Initiative gathering in Sydney formed into three working groups to provide concrete action plans in three specific areas: Partnering for Democracy, Democracy Advocates at Risk, and Anti-Corruption.

*Partnering for Democracy*

Democratic partnership is central to our efforts and necessitates mutually beneficial and respectful relationships. Democratic partnership must not solely be about creating institutions, but the harder work of building state practice and bolstering citizen engagement to empower these institutions. These discussions reinforced our understanding that while each country's national experience, culture, and form of government may vary, there are widespread pressures that all democracies must address individually and in concert.

Governments and civil society groups are considering how each democracy in the region can better provide material support for democratic governance. Civil society groups and champions of democracy need support. Some governments in the Indo-Pacific should provide funding commitments to incentivize democratic development, either through the creation of new funding mechanisms for supporting democratic institutions in the region or by integrating democratic norms and values into traditional development assistance, thereby recognizing that democratic development is integral to a society's economic development. These efforts must be undertaken hand in hand by civil society and governments as whole of society undertakings to protect the values and norms that make our countries strong. Ultimately, we encourage all governments to consider ways to increase material support to maintain the positive momentum.

We recognize that the durability of democracy will come not just through addressing anti-corruption and supporting independent media and civil society, but by bolstering democratic norms and the development of a regional architecture to be a check on authoritarianism, reinforcing universal values, and providing incentives for democratic development. A first basis for this effort should come from within existing Indo-Pacific democracies, promoting solidarity and mutual understanding, as well as support for universal values, human dignity, and democratic principles, ultimately building on that firm basis within their own countries, then promoting partnership with other countries in the region to develop a regional democratic infrastructure for the Indo-Pacific. Understanding and supporting these values and norms must come with commitments that incentivize democratic development, including through the creation of new mechanisms for supporting democratic institutions in the region.

To urge stronger leadership by regional democracies, we will convene a dialogue series on democratic thought leadership in each of the established democratic nations, including Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of

Korea, Taiwan, and Timor-Leste. The dialogue series will amplify the principles articulated in the Sunnylands Statement of Shared Democratic Principles, and nurture regional cooperation among likeminded stakeholders by exploring the creation of a regional democratic platform, including the possibility of establishing funding mechanisms.

- While a partnership will agree on goals, it will vary on funding mechanisms and approaches. Therefore, in the context of the Seoul summit, governments and civil society groups should establish a forecasting mechanism to help identify gaps or needs in civil society across the region.
- The Sunnylands Initiative will convene a dialogue series with next year's iteration to include key government and non-governmental stakeholders across the region. This dialogue series will strengthen understanding and the application of shared democratic principles in policymaking and democratization support at every level.
- We urge governments to respect civil societies domestically, while donors should elevate the prominence and coordination of their civil society support.
- Donors should support Pacific Island nations' priorities of climate security, climate justice, and human-centred development. We encourage governments to explore an initiative in the Pacific Islands that would strengthen civil society while also working with governments, as articulated in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.
- We welcome national efforts to create a regional cooperative framework for supporting civil society and independent media.
- We urge governments to coordinate within multilateral fora to advance democratic norms, most notably within APEC, ASEAN, Commonwealth of Nations, East Asia Summit, Pacific Islands Forum, and the Quad.

### *Democracy Advocates at Risk*

Democratic advocates are integral to democratic development. Safeguarding them and maintaining their advocacy work remains a challenge in the region. Authoritarian governments in the region are increasingly threatening, harassing, and intimidating democracy advocates, often forcing them to leave their home countries.

Despite a significant increase in the numbers of democracy advocates at risk (DARs), there remains no regional framework that supports them. Recognizing the reality that many DARs need to leave their home countries, as well as the

importance of DARs remaining as close to their home countries as possible, the need for such a regional support network is critical.

In order to address the growing needs of DARs across the region, we commit to supporting regional initiatives that provide refuge and fellowships, as well as operational and programmatic support to DARs. We also commit to supporting the creation of a new network of diverse stakeholders to host DARs within the region.

- The Sunnylands Initiative will establish a network of universities, think tanks, NGOs, faith-based groups, and other stakeholders to host democracy advocates at risk within the region.
- The Sunnylands Initiative will develop a strategic plan and mission to present to potential partner, member, and donor organizations within this network.
- The Sunnylands Initiative will identify hub coordinators within each country to lead this work domestically.
- We encourage governments to endorse, support, and partner with the Sunnylands Initiative on these efforts.

### *Anti-Corruption*

Corruption, bribery, and cross-border kleptocracy undermine democracy and security and are increasingly being exploited by criminal organizations and state actors. Without eliminating endemic corruption, not only do authoritarians continue to enrich themselves, but democratic states face backlash from their citizens for failing to deliver basic services and the fruits of economic development. Therefore, we see tackling systemic internal and transnational corruption as not just a central challenge to law enforcement agencies and state resilience, but also a key opportunity for democracy advocates to demonstrate collaboratively that democracy delivers better governance and economic results for citizens. Cross-border concerns include organized crime, money laundering, illicit finance, state-led efforts to corrupt democratic institutions, and elite capture.

Preventing, exposing, and prosecuting corruption cannot only depend on the efforts and integrity of national governments and their elected leaders. It is a whole of society effort including national and local government agencies, civil society organizations, financial institutions, and the media. The independence of anti-corruption institutions within states is critical. Each country can address

its own challenges to transparency, openness, and accountability at home and in a regional framework to address systemic and endemic corruption.

We support the efforts of Indo-Pacific governments to implement international conventions and standards on anti-corruption, financial crime, and transparency. We welcome new initiatives by regional actors, including the Republic of Korea's anti-corruption commitments in the Summit for Democracy and the anti-corruption agenda of India's G20 chairmanship.

- Each nation should advance financial integrity and transparency domestically and as a priority in its foreign policy, development, and democratic partnership efforts.
- Each nation should promote comprehensive, collaborative, and global approaches to anti-corruption watchdogs, enforcement, and accountability mechanisms.
- Each nation should bolster whole of government anti-corruption capabilities, strengthen the role of civil society, and a free and capable media. Donor nations and international organizations should support technical assistance and capacity building to counter financial crime. All states should strengthen collaboration, information sharing, and investigations across borders.
- The Sunnylands Initiative will convene stakeholders to identify a program of action in support of the Republic of Korea's initiative on anti-corruption.

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We ultimately remain optimistic about the future of democracy in the Indo-Pacific region. However, more work remains to be done to defend the universal values and norms that democratic governance enshrines for regional stability and economic prosperity. Such work necessitates diverse approaches that are consciously aligned to support the region's vision for open, free, transparent, accountable, inclusive, and prosperous societies.

The region is dynamic and there are differences among us. Still, one thing is clear in every nation: the people of the Indo-Pacific universally desire freedom, stability, and prosperity.

We urge governments in the region to reaffirm their commitment to democracy that delivers and the protection of fundamental human rights,



prioritize their support for democratic governance norms, and cooperate with like-minded countries and stakeholders in such efforts.

We look forward to meeting next year to benchmark our progress on these recommendations.

5 April 2023