

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

## Asia, Europe and Global Democracy: Beyond the Summit for Democracy

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*Asian and European Democracies Need to Cooperate to Help Make the New Summit Process a Success*

After much build-up during 2021, the U.S. administration held its Summit for Democracy on 9-10 December. President Biden succeeded in attracting 100 leaders to the online event and convinced states to make commitments to deepen democracy. After the success of the summit, details are now awaited on the follow-up. Governments will submit their reform commitments by mid-January, and decisions will then be needed on how progress on these will be monitored.<sup>1</sup> Work is also due on broader international initiatives of democracy support beyond the national-level commitments. A ‘year of action’ will now lead up to a second in-person summit in December 2022. The intention is for a more permanent process and set of initiatives to flow out of the two summits. Rolled together this set of developments can be referred to as an incipient ‘summit process’.

### Shared Commitment?

If this process is to be a success and have any impact at all on the acute challenges facing democracy around the world, then democracies other than the U.S. will need to engage fully, proactively, and with creative ideas. In this sense, much will depend on Asian and European democracies. If the process is to be genuinely international and not dependent on U.S. primacy, then a major push and commitment must come from these two regions that house many of the world’s most powerful democracies outside North America – and are also those regions where there is some interest in international democracy support.

Yet, it remains unclear for the moment how much effort and political capital the two regions’ democracies will invest in the summit process. Both European and Asian democracies engaged positively in the summit process but did so with many concerns. Countries from both

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<sup>1</sup> Feldstein, Steven. 2021. “The Future of Biden’s Democracy Agenda” *Persuasion*, December 11. [https://www.persuasion.community/p/the-future-of-bidens-democracy-agenda?r=f0zo&utm\\_campaign=post&utm\\_medium=web](https://www.persuasion.community/p/the-future-of-bidens-democracy-agenda?r=f0zo&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web)

regions were initially skeptical<sup>2</sup> about the Biden administration's initiative, worrying that it might add to global geopolitical tension or alternatively end up lacking operational substance. Still, most democracies in the two regions ultimately participated and broadly supported the call for more effective international coordination between democratic states.

As the process moves forward into its next phase, European and Asian outlooks and aims share many features. Several democracies in both regions can be prickly about having to labor in the U.S.'s strategic shadow and yet then have a tendency not to step forward to take on more responsibility in a way that would soften U.S. primacy. Geopolitically, Asian and European democracies have long been uneasy about any notion of a highly political, exclusive alliance or concert of democracies. They both seek a middle way between an 'alliance of democracies' and a 'great power concert' – the first having democracy as the main organizing principle of international relations, the latter seeing pragmatic cooperation between all major powers leaving no room for democracy considerations. Both rather dislike the U.S. tendency to posit democracy as being at risk mainly from active 'autocracy promotion' efforts from China and Russia.

In the run-up to the summit, both Asian and European democracies pushed for an inclusive process and raised eyebrows at the U.S. administration's seemingly ad hoc and expedient choices over who to invite and who not to invite. Both thought the issues selected by the U.S. for discussion at the summit were a good first step but too narrow and too tailored to U.S. priorities rather than inclusive of other powers' concerns. Both warned against replicating the already-existing Community of Democracies, an international organization set up in 2000 to which many European and Asian democracies belong.

Despite these shared concerns, however, there are still significant differences between Asian and European approaches to democracy support. In some sense, the two regions came to the summit from opposing directions. Many European states have more structured democracy policies than their Asian counterparts, and a longer record of working with U.S. agencies on democracy support. The EU saw this initiative as the U.S. coming 'back on board' after the Trump years and catching up with commitments to democracy support that the EU had already been developing for some time. While President Trump had been undoing much of the democracy agenda between 2016 and late 2020, the EU had in fact been adding modestly to its battery of democracy support budgets and policy instruments. Whether fairly or not, a common European sentiment was that the U.S.-led summit might simply go through the motions of reinventing the wheel in this sense.

In contrast, Asian democracies have pursued cautious democracy strategies and worried more about being bumped into overly politicized commitments driven by a geopolitical U.S. agenda - Pakistani prime minister, Imran Khan did not attend the summit citing a desire not to be dragged into either a U.S. or China-led block. Well-performing Asian democracies are still generally punching well below their weight in support for global civil society and the defense of pro-democracy actors. They espouse democracy support but usually in very oblique and indirect forms and have done little to look beyond their own immediate region to address more global democratic challenges. They would need to develop a more global perspective if they are to be prominent within the summit process and work alongside their European democratic counterparts.

If these differences over international democracy promotion could complicate future

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2 Yeo, Andrew. 2021. "Will Asia buy into the Summit for Democracy?" *Summit for Democracy*, December 1. <https://summit4democracy.org/will-asia-buy-into-the-summit-for-democracy/>

coordination under the summit process, so too could both regions' internal democracy problems. Several democracies in both Europe and Asia have suffered democratic backsliding in recent years. Democratic quality has worsened even in countries run by mainstream, supposedly liberal-democratic, non-populist political forces. This both added to the rationale for the summit, while also making several of these states nervous about external intrusion into their own domestic affairs – especially, intrusion coming at the behest of the United States, whose own democracy has been so evidently dysfunctional for some years.

After the U.S. did not invite Hungary, the latter vetoed the EU's formal participation. From a European perspective, the U.S. decision to exclude Hungary but include Poland looked curious and seemed to confirm fears that the process was driven by geopolitics: just as the EU is locked in bitter legal proceedings with Poland related to its democratic backsliding, the U.S. seemed to be giving priority to the Polish government's robust line against Russian actions. Moreover, in Asia, the U.S. invited India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and the Philippines, all of whom have lower Freedom House scores for 2021 than Hungary (67, 59, 51, 37, and 56 respectively, compared to Hungary's 69 out of 100).<sup>3</sup>

### **Common Agendas?**

In the 'year of action' ahead in 2022 and indeed over the longer term, the summit process offers Asian and European democracies a new opportunity to work together – and to start giving some substance to their longstanding rhetorical commitments to such democratic cooperation. It would benefit the EU and Asia to work directly together on democracy issues, and not just mediate their democracy cooperation with the U.S. There is a risk that the emerging cooperation over democracy will take on a hub-and-spokes structure, where each set of partners around the world relates to the U.S. but not much with each other. Asian and European democracies share an interest in making sure this does not happen and that they build ties and democracy initiatives with each other as strong as those that both have with the United States.

There is much Asia and Europe could work on together. Cooperation on democracy would flow naturally from efforts in recent years to deepen the EU-Asia relation more generally. New strategic partnerships have been signed between the EU and Japan, India, and ASEAN. The EU's just-published Global Gateway Initiative promises huge financing to underpin democratic norms and builds on the achievements of the 2018 EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy and recently concluded Connectivity Partnerships with Japan and India. Several European governments have bolstered their security presence in Asia. Some Asian democracies have also begun to engage in cooperation with problems in the EU's neighborhood. Indeed, democracy is a curiously absent piece in this jigsaw of burgeoning EU-Asian cooperation and partnership.

Asian and European democracies can work together to ensure that the summit process does not become about siding with the U.S. in a binary U.S.-China rivalry. To some extent, they may already have pulled the U.S. back partially from using the process primarily in this way. But they must also take on board the quid pro quo of this: the need for a more robust effort to defend rights in China. Asian and European partners can both work to show that keeping a robust focus on human

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<sup>3</sup> Freedom House. 2021. "Countries and Territories" *Freedom House*. <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

rights abuses in China is a matter of global concern and not a purely U.S. fixation or cover for U.S. geostrategic interests. They can show that even states well disposed towards cooperating with China are not willing to turn a blind eye to the increasingly brutal repression inside China. They could, in this way, help delink the democracy and human rights agenda from the U.S.-China rivalry.

Asian and European democracies could use the summit process to grasp the thorny issue of military intervention undertaken in the name of democracy – something the U.S. is not well placed to do. They could together draw up a Do-No-Harm approach to democracy support and set of principles to ensure that military intervention does not again in the future undermine democracy. States should be obliged to sign this as much as the internally focused commitments that dominated preparations for the first summit. Effective democracy support in the future is not only about countering autocrats but also ensuring democracies do not continue to act in a way that damages the cause of democracy.

European and Asian democracies could also jointly lead efforts on more specific themes. One of these could be sanctions. Both regions tend to feel that U.S. sanctions (especially extra-territorial measures) are overly heavy-handed and counter-productive. They could coordinate work on a nuanced template for the use of sanctions, to ensure that pressure on democracy and human rights is robust but more sensitive than U.S. measures often are. This would involve finding some middle ground as well, given that Asian democracies have so far been more reticent over the use of sanctions than European democracies.

Another theme ripe for coordination is the need to rethink democracy funding mechanisms – and this is another area where Asian and European approaches have some affinities. They could join forces to push to make the UN Democracy Fund more high profile and active. Both regions have been more open to different democratic innovations and practices than U.S. politicians have traditionally been and this could be explored through some kind of Europe-Asia ‘new democratic actors’ initiative under the summit process. The two regions could lead ways to fund digital activism projects as a means of democratic empowerment. They could also both work to bring in civil society actors more fully to the summit process - for example, they could charge CSOs with providing an independent assessment of how far states meet the commitments to reform that they made at the summit as a basis of deciding who gets invited to the next summit (to make sure the invitee list is not once again drawn up unilaterally by the U.S.).

In short, there is much the two regions’ democracies can contribute in concert with each other – both to help take the burden off the U.S. and to spread the number of states that have practical influence over the new global summit process. In a very general sense, they can both help each other. The European democracies might help activate more Asian engagement in the summit process to the extent that they can show this process is not about a uniquely U.S. assault on China. In return, Asian democracies can help re-energize European democracy policies by showing that democracy support is not Western-centric. One very concrete proposal to close: they could support each other to run the process, with perhaps one European state then one Asian state taking over the lead in turn. ■

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