



# Policy paper

# From Democracy Summit to Global Democratic Agenda?

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# Introduction

The decision of the US administration to hold a Summit for Democracy has enlivened debates about international democracy support. A virtual summit in December 2021 will lead to a year of follow-up initiatives and then an in-person summit in late 2022. Some observers are skeptical about this new process, while others see a chance to shape a more effective global democratic agenda. Whether the outcome is positive or inconsequential will depend on how multiple actors influence the process in the months ahead.

There are many aspects of the summit process that remain open for debate and will need to be resolved. This policy brief focuses on one very specific element: the question of how the involvement of Asian, African, and Latin American democracies can best be encouraged and ensured. Keen to signal its return to supporting democratic values internationally, the US proposed and has led the summit preparations. Other democracies have both welcomed this lead and expressed some unease. A key question is whether democratic countries other than the US will engage fully with the process.

If they are to do so, they will need genuine influence over shaping a fully global approach to democracy support. In return, democratic countries will need to upgrade their own so-far tepid and ultra-cautious approaches to democracy support, as well as tackle their internal democracy shortcomings. We offer five ideas for how this bargain might be taken forward, both making the longer-term summit process more genuinely global and galvanizing non-Western democracies into more meaningful commitments to supporting democratic values internationally. The process's regional and non-governmental dimensions will be of particular importance in this regard.

# Non-Western Democracy Policies

Even though democracies outside the US and Europe do not have the same kind of formally structured “democracy promotion” or “democracy support” policies as do Western powers, many of their external funding and diplomatic initiatives have come to incorporate elements that are relevant to the democracy agenda. Yet, these countries have generally failed to develop any significant effort to shore up global democratic values against today’s authoritarian surge.

Japan has upgraded its discursive commitment to liberal values since the mid-2000s and formally supported the norms and values of democracy, freedom, human rights, and the rule-based order. Relevant policy initiatives to this end include the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept, its bilateral security agreements with other democracies such as India and Australia, and multilateral agreements with other democracies such as the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement. Its National Security Strategy, as well as the Economic Cooperation Charter, also underscores Japan’s commitment to strengthening the international order based on universal values and rules.

When it comes to implementing those commitments in its foreign aid, however, Japan’s approach has been more nuanced and restrained. Instead of bringing the political terms of “democracy” and “human rights” to the forefront of its foreign aid, the country has focused on the values associated with good governance, such as openness, transparency, economic efficiency, and financial health of target countries. This is to avoid giving the impression that Japan’s foreign policy is a containment strategy against China while still promoting these values of good and democratic governance for the stability of the liberal international order.

South Korea has not integrated democracy support in its foreign policy goals, in large part as overt “democracy promotion” sounds like an intervention into other countries’ domestic politics. Only on a piecemeal basis has it in recent years stepped up several relevant commitments. It contributed 1.38 billion US dollars to the UN Democracy Fund from 2006 to 2020. The Korean foreign aid agency has supported developing countries’ public administration reform as a type of governance support, particularly around the SDG 16 goal. South Korea also launched the Association of World Election Bodies (A-Web) to assist elections in developing countries. The country also took an unprecedented step in imposing government sanctions against the Myanmar military after the military coup in 2021. Korean civil society organizations have been running projects with populations displaced by the return of autocratic regimes in Myanmar and Afghanistan.

In India, Prime Minister Modi’s government has pursued a foreign policy that preferentially engages or supports fellow democracies. This is mainly driven by Indian concerns about China’s growing political influence in Asia. Modi strongly and routinely emphasizes India’s democracy as the key to its global identity. He stresses the democratic elements of India’s economic assistance abroad, for [example](#) most recently in opening Mauritius’ new Supreme Court building that was supported by Indian funding. India has revived its financial [support](#) for the UN Democracy Fund and participation in Community of Democracies ministerial meetings. It uses increasingly clear pro-democracy language in joint diplomatic statements such as the Quad or the EU-India summit. Of course, Indian democracy is facing significant challenges internally, which often sit uneasily with these external commitments.

In Africa, democratic states pushed for adopting the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) in 2007 and have since used this normative framework to support

improvements in governance and democratic norms across the continent. Still, countries' unwillingness to establish effective implementation and enforcement mechanisms has often undermined the credibility of the African Union (AU) in taking forward the Charter. A demand for democratic, legitimate, accountable, and representative governance has been growing in Africa. Hollow performative elections have supplanted substantive democratic practice and contributed to a growing democratic disillusionment. Given this, democratic states have sought to mobilize the distinctive regional institutional architecture as a tool for democracy support across Africa. As yet, these structures have had little impact in reversing negative democratic trends in the region.

Latin American democracies express interest in democracy support, but this agenda has got caught up in the region's fraught division between leftist and right-wing governments. The adoption of the Inter-American Democratic Charter in 2001 fed expectations that Latin American democracies would adopt a strong defense of democratic practices in the region. But the region's democracies declined to invoke the charter against democratic backsliding observed in Venezuela and Nicaragua. Though the Charter is still in place, and some countries have more recently attempted to invoke it to address the problems in Venezuela and Nicaragua, left-wing democratic governments balk at condemning democratic backsliding in these countries led by leftist regimes. Other countries, like El Salvador, led by right-wing authoritarian populists, feel that they can also get away with their anti-democratic practices as long as their behavior is not as evidently anti-democratic as that of Venezuela and Nicaragua, the worst offenders. All this has dented expectations of cross-border democracy support gaining ground in Latin America.

## Positions on the Summit

Non-Western democracies will participate in the summit with differing degrees of enthusiasm and with strategic caveats. While broadly keen on the prospect of coordination among democracies, these countries have not been entirely reassured by the pre-summit preparations and harbor some misgivings about what kind of processes emerge after the December kick-off meeting.

South Korea has been relatively enthusiastic about the summit. The country was invited to the 2021 G7 summit in the UK largely due to wide international recognition of its democratic performance. South Korea has been keen on cooperation with other democracies for many years. Nevertheless, the Korean government is concerned about the US using the summit as an anti-China alliance and is more comfortable with democracy cooperation of a more functional kind that contributes to managing the pandemic, gender issues, anti-corruption, and green technology. Despite its concerns, the South Korean government is likely to be supportive of the US, not least since it needs the Biden administration's cooperation in dealing with North Korea and other national security issues.

The Indian government has engaged with the summit process, even though the fact that the summit is being hosted by the United States to some degrees lessens its enthusiasm. India is keen to use the democracy narrative principally to demarcate India strategically from China and present an alternative model of governance to other developing democracies – and sees the summit through this lens. India will not participate as enthusiastically as many others, and to allay sensitivities Narendra Modi will be looking for Western acknowledgment of India's native roots of democracy and a narrative centered on the equal validity of different democratic models.

Japan has a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards the summit. It did not actively lobby for such an initiative in Washington, D.C.. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has left summit-related matters to the relatively small and marginal Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Division. Japan does not want the summit to be an exclusive democracy grouping, mainly for fear that the US would exclude some Southeast Asian countries of strategic importance to Japan. Japan has generally welcomed a big-tent approach, including prominent involvement from civil society rather than the process being a purely government-led geostrategic initiative.

Despite recent reversals, Africa is still likely to be the most represented continent at the summit – in terms of participating states. The bigger states like Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, and Kenya, as well as the smaller ones, such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Mauritius, are set to engage with the process. However, many of these countries are suffering severe democratic backsliding and will be participating mainly with an eye to reaping the economic advantages of belonging to the wealthy club of democracies. Governments may use such favorable economic positioning to undermine domestic democratic competition. From Africa, it may be the inclusion of civil society voices that bring the most enthusiastic and enriching contribution.

Unsurprisingly, all the non-Western democracies express concerns about the process that takes shape after the first summit. They will not want it to be seen as a process led heavy-handedly by Western, developed countries in accordance with their own democratic templates. The more equality there is between democracies, the more fully they are likely to participate in follow-up initiatives. Most of these countries are hesitant about any heavy institutional formalization of new coordination among democracies – they are not likely to be keen on a formal charter, large secretariat, formal entry criteria, rigid rules of participation, and the likes. Most strikingly, all are uneasy about a process of democratic coordination being molded around the US's judgments of other states' democratic credentials and its own geostrategic interests. While broadly positive towards international cooperation on democracy, they will not want to be associated with any new democratic interventionism.

## Five Ideas for Non-Western Leads

Against this backdrop, five sets of ideas or guidelines could be useful in enticing non-Western democracies into full engagement with the new process. These five proposals reflect concerns that it will be vital that the Western powers take on board if they want to see a genuinely global democratic agenda take shape. And they will equally require non-Western states dramatically to strengthen their own commitments to democracy.

### ■ 1. Functional and flexible clusters

Non-Western democracies are more likely to buy into new democratic coordination if it is organized around functional clusters. They could then be encouraged – indeed, prompted – to take the lead on certain sectoral challenges, run through flexible forums that states voluntarily opt into. Some US policymakers have expressed interest in this kind of functional approach. Yet, for now, it is the US that has set the agenda around three thematic clusters (defending against authoritarianism, corruption, and human rights) that may exclude issues of equal importance to other democracies. The functional logic could be given a much stronger push in 2022. Themes could include electoral and parliamentary processes, data privacy, regulating tech, state-led propaganda, digital tools to empower civil society, and education for democracy. A collection of such plurilateral alliances, differing in membership

across different issues, is more likely to gain broad support beyond the West than any impression of a single “concert of democracies” type structure.

## ■ 2. Regional frameworks

In a similar vein, the summit process could usefully be broken into regional clusters as a way of strengthening the buy-in and commitment of non-Western democracies. These regional clusters might include Latin and Central America, the Indian Ocean region, Indo-Pacific, Africa, or South-South/G77 democracies.

Existing inter-governmental regional frameworks in Asia include the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, the Bali Democracy Forum (BDF), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Charter of Democracy and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (that emphasizes shared universal values and the maintenance of the rules-based order). Still, none of these have done much to support civil liberties in the region, and none have installed practical mechanisms to protect and promote democracy. Indeed, Asia is almost the only region that does not have a pan-regional framework that can be used to defend democracies. Given that Asian governments are comfortable with multilateral approaches to democracy support, but not with bilateral approaches, regional mechanisms would have the potential to shore-up democratic norms. The regional focus could make sense as the challenges are different across regions; in some regimes are canceling elections and tampering with election results, in others democratic backsliding is led by democratically elected leaders. In Latin America, tackling inequality needs a specific effort; also, in this region opposition forces need to be engaged, not just civil society.

## ■ 3. The China factor

Non-Western democracies are most concerned that the process will become too hostile towards China – although India certainly is keen to generate stronger pressure on China. If the US is genuine about co-ownership of post-summit follow-up, the non-Western democracies could and should take the lead on this issue. They will need to map policy options that, on the one hand, avoid new pro-democratic coordination from being seen as an anti-China mechanism, while on the other hand addressing Chinese human rights abuses within and beyond its borders and showing that democracies can deal with global challenges more effectively than autocracies. Asian democracies are cautious in addressing abuses inside China but are more supportive of mobilizing a common democratic community against China’s coercive tactics outside its borders.

## ■ 4. Non-governmental track

More engagement from civil society networks is needed to push governments and international organizations to prioritize global democratic renewal. The non-Western democracies are all keen on there being a strong civil society dimension to post-summit processes. They could and should be invited to take the lead in overseeing this strand. A kind of “track 1.5” ethos could be developed. Several initiatives already exist, like the Bali Democracy Forum and a D10 grouping of foreign ministers, as well as programs such as the [Sunnylands Initiative](#) – a collaboration between US and Asian civil society actors. These could be taken much further and made more directly relevant to operational democracy support. Particularly African civil society has been pushing to be fully involved and calling for a long-term process, measured expectations and a genuinely equal partnership between



both north and south, and governments and civic actors. Western civil society actors would need to buy into this kind of “track 1.5” to give a global flavor to civil society initiatives after the summit. An initiative through Forum 2000 could help in this regard.

## ■ 5. A “reversed gaze” track

The new process must include a willingness from Western, developed democracies to learn from actors in other democracies about their experiences in combatting illiberalism, running elections, managing diversity, using inclusive digital tools for development, data privacy, and tech regulation. A body or forum should be created specifically to offer advice and ideas from non-Western democracies on how Western democracies should address the parlous state of their own democratic politics.

## Conclusion

To conclude, if the summit process is to become fully global and generate long-term policy content, a quid-pro-quo will be needed. On the one hand, the US and other Western states will need to relinquish control and be open to non-Western powers’ concerns and ideas if they want others to participate fully. On the other hand, if offered such agenda-setting opportunities, these non-Western democracies will, in turn, need to step up and contribute rather than simply expressing misgivings from the sidelines.

If they do not want it to be a US- or Western-led process, these states need to seize the opportunity to develop their own ideas and increase their own commitment to defending democratic values globally. Apart from the long-term thematic areas suggested above, a more immediate signal would be for participants in December’s virtual summit to agree to hold the next summit in a non-Western democracy. So far, the emerging summit process does not meet the magnitude of challenges facing global democracy. Neither Western nor non-Western states have yet stepped up to offer the kind of strategies and commitment capable of making a tangible difference. If the summit process is to move beyond the cosmetic, both groups of states need to move up many gears and work together in a spirit of co-ownership and resolve.

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