



How to Support Democracy and Human Rights in Asia

By Michael Fuchs | September 16, 2019

There is a growing struggle in Asia between authoritarian forces and the people attempting to stand up for human rights and democracy. From the crackdown on mass protests in Hong Kong, to genocide in Myanmar, to extrajudicial killings and attacks on government critics in the Philippines, to the detention of more than 1 million Uighur Muslims in concentration camps in western China, the situation can appear bleak. While these and other abuses of power playing out across Asia are not unique to the region, the continued deterioration of human rights and democracy in Asia could have disastrous consequences, not only for the region but also for the United States.

Faced with mounting challenges to universal rights in Asia, U.S. policymakers often have difficult decisions to make: What tools can the United States deploy to ameliorate the situation? How can U.S. action tangibly support human rights?

As daunting as these challenges are, the United States must stick to its principles to support human rights and democracy and the peaceful resolution of disputes. To do so, the United States must pursue immediate and long-term policies that increase the likelihood of governments respecting the rights of their people.

Troubling times across Asia

In the second half of the 20th century, hundreds of millions of people benefited from the democratization processes across Asia. The United States did much to support this trend over the past few decades, from helping to democratize Japan in the wake of World War II¹ to providing assistance to countries, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, that have transitioned to democratic forms of governance in more recent years.²

Yet autocratic governments still rule billions of people in Asia. China's persistent authoritarian presence casts a long and ominous shadow; North Korea's grave human rights violations continue to shock the conscience; and Vietnam and Laos

remain one-party states. Moreover, the people of numerous other Asian countries remain in some form of limbo, benefiting from aspects of democracy without enjoying full human rights protections.

The cultural relativism narrative of “Asian values” is still cited as justification for the region’s lack of democracy.³ As the theory goes, Asian countries have different values that prioritize the community over the individual, and therefore, Western democracy and human rights supposedly are unnecessary. The false notion that a nondemocratic form of government, such as that of China or Vietnam, can better promote economic growth and the collective good still carries sway in large parts of the region.

Furthermore, the long history of U.S. policies that undermined democracy and human rights in the region has rightly fueled skepticism of America’s support for universal rights. From the Vietnam War to decades of U.S. support of dictators in South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, and the Philippines, the United States has done significant damage to the cause of human rights and democracy in Asia.

Today, the challenges to human rights are mounting. China has detained more than 1 million Uighurs in concentration camps in Xinjiang in a systematic effort to extinguish their ethnic and cultural heritage.⁴ Myanmar, after embarking on a democratic transition, has carried out genocide against its Rohingya Muslim population.⁵ In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte is pursuing an extrajudicial drug war and has cracked down on press freedoms.⁶ Thailand’s military is cementing its position five years after a coup brought it to power. And in Hong Kong, there are fears that Beijing could end the current round of protests with Tiananmen-like violence.⁷

President Donald Trump, of course, has made clear how little he cares about human rights and democracy. Trump praises Duterte while ignoring his human rights abuses;⁸ invited Thailand’s dictator to the White House;⁹ and heaps acclaim on North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un.¹⁰ Trump has said he is willing to disregard human rights in exchange for progress on economic issues,¹¹ tweeting “Hong Kong is not helping”¹² in response to the ongoing trade war with Beijing. Through disinterest and inaction, the Trump administration renders the United States complicit in the repression of people by authoritarian governments.

Why the United States should care

Democracy and human rights are intertwined, as a true democracy protects human rights, and the protection of human rights can only be guaranteed in a democracy. Democracies, of course, are about far more than elections, and U.S. policy must focus on encouraging the growth of all aspects of democracy: unfettered elections, a free press, an equitable economy, an independent judiciary, and a thriving civil society.

Supporting democracy and human rights advances U.S. prosperity and security. Mature democracies are less likely to go to war with one another and are more likely to support sustainable economic growth over time.¹³ Greater levels of democracy in Asia mean a reduced chance of conflict that could affect the U.S. economy or, worse, drag the United States into a war.¹⁴

Moreover, defending human rights is the right thing to do. Human rights, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and backed by the United Nations, are universal.¹⁵ Standing up for political rights such as freedom of speech and assembly and for economic rights such as labor protections and health care is morally just. Championing these principles is part of what defines America. Despite its failings at home and abroad, the United States was founded on the belief that a democratic system, which protects human rights and has the capacity to improve itself, is the best form of government.¹⁶ In order to live up to that ideal and to distinguish America's foreign policy from that of countries such as China, it is incumbent that the United States does what it can to support these rights globally.

What the United States can do

There is no policy silver bullet that can effectively advance human rights and democracy abroad. In some places, the United States can make a real difference; in others, opportunities to usher in change are slim. Although there are places where the United States may be unable to directly engender change, it must continue to stand up for universal values. To do otherwise would undermine U.S. economic and security interests, as well as shirk responsibility and moral obligation.

The United States has no shortage of tools to support democracy and human rights in Asia. U.S. leaders can send important signals through public rhetoric and private diplomacy. In addition, the United States allocates tens of millions of dollars each year to support civil society organizations and provide trainings for government officials. Importantly, sanctions and other punitive measures can also deliver a strong message when governments violate human rights or backslide on democratic principles.

Here are a few principles the United States should follow in its foreign policy approach, no matter the circumstance:

- **Support those on the ground and follow their lead.** A key aspect of advancing human rights and democracy is supporting the people aspiring to secure those rights. The United States must pay close attention to the perspectives of citizens and civil society and understand what they are asking for when crafting policies.
- **Recognize that human rights reinforce other U.S. interests.** U.S. policymakers frequently create a false paradigm by weighing interests against one another; one example is the belief that supporting human rights comes at the cost of risking other U.S. interests.¹⁷ While it is certainly true that pushing a country on one issue can

affect cooperation on other issues, supporting human rights and democracy arguably advances U.S. economic and security interests over the long term. The United States must act to improve the human rights situation. Lastly, when America makes trade-offs to advance its other interests, it signals to repressive regimes that they can do the same, ultimately making the United States less effective at achieving its foreign policy goals.

- **Speak up.** Although public statements can sometimes fail to result in significant change, they are nonetheless necessary. No matter which other policies the United States considers, it must make its views clear and public. At the very least, the people struggling for their rights and freedom can take encouragement in knowing that the United States is speaking out in support of their cause.
- **Work with allies.** More voices are better than one. The United States is likely to be more effective if it coordinates efforts with allies and partners around the world.
- **Boost democracy assistance.** U.S. democracy assistance—which includes support to civil society and assistance to governments—is a crucial, tangible strategy for improved governance in countries across the democracy spectrum. Moreover, this assistance must focus on securing stronger protections for labor rights, environmental safeguards, and anti-corruption efforts.
- **Improve human rights and democracy at home.** American democracy is far from perfect and in recent years has taken tremendous steps backward. In order to assume a credible role in supporting democracy and human rights around the world, the United States must continue to strive for a more perfect union by reinvigorating its democratic institutions and respecting and protecting the rights of all people living within its borders.

When it comes to standing up for democratic values and human rights, the overarching question is how best to apply different tools to unique situations. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, it is important to understand how different strategies can support the cause of human rights and democracy across the region.

How to prevent imminent violent repression

When people take to the streets to protest repressive governments or when there are signs of an imminent crackdown by a government on its citizens, it is important for the United States to act. In so doing, however, the United States must strike a careful balance between offering support and inadvertently bolstering the specious argument frequently made by authoritarian governments that domestic protest movements are somehow being fomented by America and the West.¹⁸ That said, repressive regimes are likely to blame the United States regardless of its level of involvement, so the United States need not be overly concerned with this perception.

To deter crackdowns by repressive regimes, the United States can take the following steps:

- **Signal clear public support for vulnerable populations.** The United States must publicly state its desire for a peaceful resolution to conflict between a government and its citizens along with full-throated support for the protection of human rights. U.S. public support signals to people on the ground and to the world exactly where the United States stands and can help rally support from other countries.
- **Send private messages to repressive governments clearly outlining the consequences of violence.** The United States must engage with problematic regimes to send the unequivocal message that a peaceful resolution is necessary and that any violence will be met with concrete responses from the United States. These private signals should not only make clear that there will be consequences, but also give the regime a potentially face-saving way out if it refrains from further repression. Importantly, the United States must only threaten consequences if it is willing to follow through on them, as making empty threats will only weaken its credibility.
- **Prepare tangible responses to violence.** The United States must prepare specific sanctions or other actions tailored to each particular case in the event of a violent crackdown.
- **Use technology to keep people connected to the world and one another.** Civil society movements rely on modern communications technology to organize and ensure that information reaches the rest of the world. The United States can work with technology companies to ensure that those lines of communication stay open.
- **Avoid counterproductive actions.** The United States must refrain from taking counterproductive steps. For example, in response to Beijing’s involvement in the Hong Kong protests, there are growing calls to consider ending Hong Kong’s special status, which is derived from a 1992 U.S. law that enables the United States to engage the city differently from mainland China in economic and political relations.¹⁹ However, such a move could further cut off the people of Hong Kong from the rest of the world and worsen their plight.²⁰ Similarly, returning Myanmar to its former state of international isolation in response to the mass atrocities against the Rohingya, as opposed to pursuing a more targeted response, would be more likely to hurt the Rohingya and other people of Myanmar.²¹

How to respond to violent repression

When autocratic governments pursue violence and repression against their citizens, the United States must respond decisively. While it is difficult to change the actions of repressive governments, that in no way means that the United States cannot make a difference. Quick and resolute action is most effective; a delayed or a piecemeal process—such as the Trump administration’s slow rollout of actions against Myanmar in the wake of the Rohingya genocide²²—has little chance of stopping the violence and sends weak signals about the United States’ depth of concern.

In the face of violence and increased repression, the United States should:

- **Impose targeted costs.** The United States must follow through on its promised actions or quickly implement consequences in the event of sudden repression. Targeted sanctions leveled against the individuals involved in a crackdown can send a signal but may not have much practical effect. However, sanctions through U.S. firms and international companies that conduct business with a repressive regime are a potentially powerful tool, although they must be wielded carefully to avoid negative ripple effects. In extreme cases, such as the genocide in Myanmar and the Uighur concentration camps in China, the United States should use a combination of these punitive tools while also rallying the world to apply concerted pressure. In addition, the United States should demand urgent U.N. Security Council meetings and action; even if Russia or China vote to prevent decisive action, these meetings can force international spotlight on the issue.
- **Recognize that there is power in numbers.** The most effective pressure on autocratic regimes is often through coordination with partners and allies.²³ Concerted pressure from a variety of partners—especially if sanctions are involved—can significantly affect the calculus of a repressive regime.
- **Activate regional institutions.** While Asia has few regional security institutions, the United States should press for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asia Summit (EAS)—which consists of ASEAN countries and eight other regional powers, as well as the United States—to meet for emergency sessions to respond to human rights violations.
- **Establish the steps necessary to improve circumstances on the ground.** The private diplomacy that follows a government crackdown must signal that a swift U.S. response is imminent. At the same time, diplomatic efforts need to clearly outline the steps the regime must take to improve the situation and potentially forestall or remove the threatened U.S. actions.

While these actions may not necessarily influence repressive regimes or force governments to alter course, they can clearly indicate that there will be costs for continued repression and violence and that this pressure will not be relieved unless certain steps are taken. Furthermore, they serve as a deterrent to other countries that might consider gross human rights violations.

How to deal with democratic backsliding

Democratic backsliding creates a different set of challenges for the United States. When democracies erode—such as when a coup overthrows the democratically elected government or an elected government assaults democratic institutions—the United States must use its leverage to try to mitigate the damage. At the same time, the United States should proceed with caution, recognizing that democracies often have legitimate processes that remain intact and can address the domestic situation without intense outside pressure, depending on the severity and nature of the erosion.

Another complicating factor is that democracies are often held to much higher standards than nondemocracies: For instance, if a democratic country backslides, there may be pressure for the United States to respond with harsh sanctions. However, the United States is rarely expected to level similar punitive measures on autocratic countries that have never experienced democracy. There are few calls for the United States to increase sanctions on Jordan or Vietnam, for instance, but when a true democracy such as the Philippines backslides—even if it maintains most of its democratic institutions—the calls for pressure grow very loud.²⁴ However, such U.S. pressure is necessary regardless of a possible double standard.

In response to democratic backsliding, the United States should:

- **Downgrade the partnership.** The United States should respond appropriately and in a timely fashion to any erosion in democracy, especially when the democratic institutions of a U.S. ally are under assault. In the case of democratic backsliding in an allied country, the United States has a greater stake in the outcomes. Moreover, without a U.S. response, other countries could perceive the United States as complicit in democratic erosion by virtue of its ongoing security partnership. The United States must downgrade the allied relationship, which includes suspending security cooperation and refraining from high-level visits. For example, after the 2014 coup in Thailand, the Obama administration suspended certain types of security assistance, downgraded the nature of military cooperation, and stopped sending high-level officials to Thailand, though the policy on visits was effectively reversed by the Trump administration in 2017.²⁵
- **Discern cooperation that helps people from cooperation that could further harm them.** While cooperation with governments on certain issues—countering human trafficking, for instance—should continue, U.S. support to security services or other institutions that could be used to further erode democratic institutions must end. The United States can continue to work with an allied country on outward-facing security threats, as in the case of U.S. support to the Philippines in the South China Sea, but assistance such as selling weapons that could be used by internal security forces must cease. Moreover, the United States must send a clear message that the lower-profile, reduced alliance will continue until democracy has been restored.

How to apply appropriate pressure

Once the United States has applied pressure on a country that has violently cracked down on its own people or eroded democratic norms, one question inevitably arises: How long should the U.S. maintain pressure?

There are many instances of the United States resuming normal relations with autocracies after egregious human rights violations. For example, while the United States maintained an arms embargo on China after its violent crackdown on protesters in 1989, the United States resumed active support for China's integration into the global economy and membership in the World Trade Organization during the 1990s.²⁶

It is important to set realistic expectations with a regime early in the process when deciding how long to apply pressure. If an offending regime is given specific demands, there are clear steps that can serve as a benchmark for progress. If a regime then fails to take those steps, it does not mean that its relationship with the United States can never change, but it means that the relationship should not return to what it was before. Additionally, U.S. pressure can continue to be directed toward specific individuals—for instance, the officials directly involved in carrying out the mass atrocities in Myanmar—or on specific aspects of the relationship, such as the arms embargo against China.

Supporting democracy and human rights over the long term

There are other steps that the United States can take to advance democracy and human rights in Asia. The United States can attempt to strengthen global multilateral mechanisms, such as the Community of Democracies, and rejoin the U.N. Human Rights Council. It can open its doors to more refugees and asylum-seekers and, most importantly, improve its track record on democracy and human rights at home.

In Asia, the United States should forge closer bonds with the region's democracies, aiming to both strengthen existing democracies in Asia and enable them to coordinate more effectively on behalf of democracy and human rights throughout the region. During the George W. Bush administration, the United States started an informal network with a similar aim called the Asia-Pacific Democracy Partnership, but the effort languished.²⁷ Recently, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and India—resumed meeting at a senior-official level with the goal of forging a strategic partnership among four of the largest democracies in Asia with veiled intentions of countering China's regional influence.²⁸ Whatever the forum, the United States must find ways to bring together the

democracies of Asia—quietly, conspicuously, or both—to forge shared approaches to democracy and human rights in the region. To that end, the United States, in concert with Asian allies, should:

- **Create an Asia-Pacific Democracy Network.** The United States should revive a version of the Asia-Pacific Democracy Partnership in a new format that weaves together a combination of formal and informal gatherings of officials from as many Asian democracies as possible, including Japan, South Korea, Australia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Indonesia, India, and Taiwan. The network’s goals should include coordination on specific issues and a public show of democratic solidarity as well as serving as a venue for longer-term collaboration on strengthening democracy across the region. This sort of initiative must also be linked with more global efforts to bring democracies facing similar challenges together, whether through the Community of Democracies or other mechanisms.
- **Integrate Taiwan.** A key component of longer-term efforts to advance democracy is working with Taiwan, a thriving democracy facing growing pressure from Beijing.²⁹ The United States should make sure that it not only continues to provide for Taiwan’s autonomy and security, but also integrates Taiwan into broader regional and global networks that can protect its democratic system. Even as the United States maintains the “One China” policy³⁰ and the Taiwan Relations Act³¹—effectively meaning that the United States does not take sides in the dispute between China and Taiwan and upholds a relationship with Taiwan that includes providing security and economic support—there is plenty of space for the United States to more robustly support Taiwan, its democracy, and its autonomy.
- **Encourage ASEAN to address democracy and human rights.** ASEAN has historically shied away from tackling challenges to human rights and democracy, especially when non-ASEAN countries are present in broader meetings such as the EAS.³² Nevertheless, the United States must push for action on grave human rights violations—such as Thailand’s democratic regression, Duterte’s drug war, Myanmar’s genocide of the Rohingya, and China’s detention of Uighurs—including by making sure that these violations are on the agenda at annual EAS and ASEAN meetings with the United States. Through interparliamentary exchanges, trainings, and other mechanisms, the United States should also support efforts to expand ASEAN’s capacity on issues such as anti-corruption, environmental protections, labor rights, and more.

An immediate role for Congress

Many of the above recommendations are geared toward the U.S. executive branch. However, with a presidential administration that largely ignores human rights challenges at home and abroad—and, in many ways, has made them worse—Congress

must step up to play a leadership role, just as when it passed a resolution to end U.S.-Saudi support for the war in Yemen.³³ There are a few ways that Congress can act:

- **Force the administration's hand.** Whether in response to the detention of Uighurs or the genocide against the Rohingya—and with the Trump administration acting too slowly or not at all—Congress can pass legislation that forces the administration to impose costs on the offending regimes. There are multiple pieces of legislation that have been introduced in Congress to respond to human rights abuses in China, Myanmar, and the Philippines.³⁴ Congress should use these opportunities to send a firm signal to these countries and to the Trump administration that it will take strong action.
- **Create a democratic strategic advantage initiative.** The United States can also streamline its own policies to maximize its impact in support of democratic countries by creating a democratic strategic advantage initiative.³⁵ Such an initiative would provide a combination of financial and security assistance as well as other policy preferences such as advantageous trade terms.³⁶ This is a particularly important tool that could be used effectively to support countries, in Asia and elsewhere, that are on the right path toward strengthening democracy and human rights.
- **Speak out.** Countries in the region pay close attention to what leaders in Congress say and do; therefore, it is especially important for U.S. congressional leaders to speak out early and often on issues of human rights and democracy. In addition, meeting with officials and civil society in the region and in Washington while delivering the right messages during these sessions can send important signals about the United States' commitment to universal values, as well as the potential consequences imposed for gross human rights violations.

Conclusion

With mounting and urgent human rights challenges across Asia today, it is important for the United States to craft tailored, concrete strategies to support democracy and human rights and to prevent and respond to human rights violations and democratic backsliding. The United States cannot control what happens across the region, but with the right policies, it can make a difference in outcomes on the ground. If the United States does not act now, the deterioration of human rights and democracy in Asia could begin to have real and direct consequences on the region and on the United States.

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