

# A Free and Open Indo-Pacific in 2040?

## Democracy, Autocracy, and What Is in Between

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### Abstract

The Indo-Pacific's future is often depicted as a battleground between democracy and autocracy, reflecting a geopolitical struggle between visions of free and repressive world orders. Initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue envision a “free and open” Indo-Pacific, assuming a deepening of democratic governance. This article explores the feasibility of such deepening within and among Indo-Pacific democracies in the near future. It assesses the current and prospective prevalence of democratic and autocratic regimes in the Indo-Pacific today and in the likely future, and the growing prevalence of “illiberal”, semi-democratic regimes in the region. Additionally, it examines the implications of a region split three ways between a mostly-democratic maritime East Asia, a mostly autocratic East Asian mainland, and a South Asia hovering between the two. The article concludes with a re-evaluation of the democratic peace theory—a cornerstone principle in international relations, but one which may need to be re-evaluated in the light of the regional trend towards illiberal democracy.

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A recurrent framing of Indo-Pacific futures foresees a region cleaved between democracy and autocracy. The 2017 US *National Security Strategy* predicts “A geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order . . . taking place in the Indo-Pacific region.”<sup>1</sup> The concept of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” pioneered by the late Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe, with China as an implicit focal point, has spurred novel forms of minilateralism among the “four great democracies” of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia.<sup>2</sup> “We strive for a region that is free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion” announced the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) leaders in 2021.<sup>3</sup> The 2022 US *Indo-Pacific*

<sup>1</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017), 45, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Secretary Antony J. Blinken Opening Remarks at the Quadrilateral Ministerial Meeting” (remarks, Melbourne, Australia, 11 February 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement: ‘The Spirit of the Quad’” (press release, The White House, 12 March 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>, emphasis added.

*Strategy* similarly places democratic alliances at the core of its five objectives—“an Indo-Pacific that is open, connected, prosperous, resilient, and secure.”<sup>4</sup>

Given such aspirations, it is pertinent to ask whether a strengthening in democratic governance and a deepening of ties among Indo-Pacific democracies is feasible in the years to come. Prior to the advent of the Quad, democracy was not historically a basis for effective regionalism in the Indo-Pacific, unlike Europe or the Americas.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the NATO model, establishing a democratic security community in the Indo-Pacific entails uniting vastly diverse cultures and even civilizations—Western and Asian—a significantly greater challenge. However, the reality of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as an aggressive autocracy, willing and able to undermine the liberal order, has underscored the importance of taking regime type more seriously as the cornerstone for collective action. The PRC presents the region and the world with an alternative governance model based on one-party rule, which sacrifices rights and freedoms for the promise of political stability and unimpeded development. Considering this, what are the prospects for an Indo-Pacific “democratic security diamond,” as initially envisioned by Shinzo Abe?

To answer this, we must first establish a clear definition of *democracy*. The term suffers from significant misuse and overuse; when even North Korea is officially a “Democratic People’s Republic”, the word can mean everything and nothing. Hence, most scholars adhere to what Samuel Huntington called a “modest meaning of democracy,” primarily emphasizing the institutional mechanisms enabling the selection and alteration of governments through popular suffrage.<sup>6</sup>

This minimalist definition encompasses three fundamental criteria: meaningful *competition* for political authority among individuals and organized groups; inclusive *participation* in the selection of leaders and policies, preferably through free and fair elections; and a level of *civil and political liberties* adequate to safeguard the integrity of political competition and participation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States” (fact sheet, The White House, 11 February 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein, “Why Is There No NATO in Asia?: Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origins of Multilateralism,” *International Organization* 56, no. 3 (2002): 575–607, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The Modest Meaning of Democracy” in *Democracy in the Americas: Stopping the Pendulum*, ed., Robert A. Pastor (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1989), 11–28.

<sup>7</sup> Larry Diamond, Juan Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, “Introduction: What Makes for Democracy?” in *Politics in Developing Countries: Comparing Experiences with Democracy*, ed., Larry Diamond, Juan Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995), xvi.

The latter criterion further enables us to distinguish between mere electoral democracies and more developed “liberal” democracies. *Electoral democracies* are those where the electoral process functions to establish majority rule under basic standards of political and civil liberties: if a government can be ousted through elections, then it can be classified as an electoral democracy. *Liberal democracies*, however, extend beyond this point: they not only elect leaders freely and fairly, but also constrain them. Moreover, robust and autonomous institutions ensure that all citizens, including minorities, receive equitable treatment under the law.

This distinction holds particular significance in the Indo-Pacific region, which boasts numerous electoral democracies where majority vote determines governmental control, but relatively few liberal democracies where the rights of all citizens, whether majority or minority, are respected and safeguarded both in law and in practice.

Presently, only the established democracies of Australia, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, and the United States, alongside Taiwan, Timor-Leste, and select smaller Pacific Island nations, meet the threshold of liberal democracy, even under a lenient interpretation of the term.<sup>8</sup> Notably, Taiwan emerges as Asia’s foremost liberal, inclusive, and representative democracy across numerous metrics, despite lacking juridical statehood.<sup>9</sup> Historically, Washington has maintained a stance of accepting any resolution negotiated between Taipei and Beijing, provided it is peaceful and enjoys the consent of the Taiwanese people. However, the consent of the populace is precisely what democracy demands, a principle the PRC cannot abide. Thus, any annexation of Taiwan by the mainland, whether through coercion or alternative methods, would mark the demise of this bold and thus far successful experiment in Sinic democratic governance—a model that directly challenges the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) ideology and perspective. Moreover, such an action would signify a significant stride toward PRC dominance in East Asia, carrying dire ramifications for the United States and its democratic allies within the region.

While a potential PRC annexation of Taiwan represents the most significant singular threat to Indo-Pacific democracy, it is not the sole concern. Presently, numerous Asian nations that appeared a decade ago to be progressing toward fractious yet authentic electoral democracies, with prospects for liberal advancement, have regressed toward repression and illiberalism. This category includes nations such as the Philippines, the oldest democracy in Southeast Asia, which witnessed a drastic shift toward populism and lawlessness during the tenure of

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<sup>8</sup> *Freedom in the World 2022* (New York: Freedom House, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> For example, Taiwan has been the topped-ranked Asian democracy by the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index in recent years.

former President Rodrigo Duterte. Similarly, another US treaty ally, Thailand, has experienced extended periods of military rule since the coups of 2006 and 2014, interspersed with sporadic instances of competitive elections. In the recent May 2023 Thai general election, the opposition Move Forward Party secured the highest vote share, yet was obstructed from assuming power due to the presence of 250 military-appointed senators.

Indonesia, the world's third-largest electoral democracy following India and the United States, stands as one of the rare instances of representative democracy within the Muslim world. However, under President Joko Widodo's leadership, Indonesia too has taken a more illiberal trajectory—a trend likely to persist under the administration of the newly elected President Prabowo Subianto, a former general. Instances of discrimination and violence against minority groups, the politicization of blasphemy laws, and entrenched systemic corruption have contributed to escalating religious intolerance and the erosion of independent governing institutions. Added to this is the regime's readiness to coopt individuals who publicly critique democracy itself, with Prabowo being a notable example.<sup>10</sup> His resounding victory in Indonesia's February 2024 presidential election, coupled with the appointment of Widodo's son Gibran as vice-president, hints at a potential resurgence of multigenerational political dynasties dominating Indonesian politics once again.

As these instances illustrate, the regime type of numerous Southeast Asian nations could be characterized as *quasi-democratic*. Among these, perhaps the most enduring example of quasi-democracy is Singapore. Despite boasting higher levels of development than any other country in the region, including the United States, Singapore has never witnessed a transfer of governmental power. It and neighboring Malaysia for many years adhered to a comparable model of elections that were nominally free but not genuinely fair. In both cases, internal security regulations, electoral manipulations, a compliant judiciary, and a pro-government media facilitated the incumbent's retention of power. Tactics such as defamation lawsuits and other legal intimidations have been employed to silence critics and dissuade challengers, exemplifying a form of governance characterized as rule *by* law rather than the rule *of* law. While this model largely remains intact, Malaysia underwent a surprising change of government in 2018 and is now under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, a former senior minister and one-time prisoner during the now discredited Barisan Nasional regime.

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<sup>10</sup> Eve Warburton and Edward Aspinall. "Explaining Indonesia's Democratic Regression: Structure, Agency and Popular Opinion," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (August 2019): 255–85, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

These cases speak to long-running debates about the nature of Asian democracy. During the 1980s and 1990s, scholars engaged in a broad comparison between Western and Asian democracy, characterizing the Asian variant by the soft authoritarianism exemplified by Singapore and Malaysia, as well as transitional cases like South Korea and Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> Arguing that liberal democracy was a Western imposition, long-serving Asia leaders such as Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore and Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia justified the curtailment of civil liberties and restrictions on democratic competition during their rule by referencing the perceived dangers of disorderly, contentious, and identity-focused politics should control be relaxed. *Benevolent authoritarianism*, they contended, was preferable for maintaining social stability, selecting meritocratic elites, establishing stable long-term policy frameworks, and fostering economic development.

Fareed Zakaria coined the term *illiberal democracy* to delineate this political model, wherein elected administrations garner popular support while routinely disregarding constraints on their authority and impeding their citizens' fundamental freedoms.<sup>12</sup> This model is analytically and substantively different to that of one-party autocracies such as China, where competitive elections and rules-based contestation for power are anathema. Under illiberal democracy, by contrast, elections are conducted and the façade of democracy upheld, allowing opposition parties to participate and occasionally secure seats, albeit seldom enough to pose a credible threat to the incumbent's grip on power. Simultaneously, freedoms of speech and assembly are curtailed, with government critics encountering harassment and facing legal reprisals aimed at stifling free expression and undermining the vitality of even moderately dissenting voices.

Presently, a distinctive manifestation of illiberal electoral democracy seems to be taking shape in India and other South Asian nations, blending elements of the Southeast Asian model by employing legal intimidations to silence dissent and dissuade opposition, alongside populist appeals to identity, religion, and culture. Under the unabashedly Hindu nationalist stance of Narendra Modi and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's longstanding principles of accommodating its diverse cultural fabric have been supplanted by a cruder form of majority rule. With successive landslide election triumphs, the BJP has honed a brand of populist politics wherein dissenting voices are either marginalized, intimidated, or silenced. Crucial checks and balances, including judicial autonomy, press freedoms,

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<sup>11</sup> Mark R. Thompson, "Whatever Happened to 'Asian Values'?" *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 4 (October 2001): 154–65, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November/December 1997): 22–43, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

and civil liberties, have been progressively undermined. Consequently, there has been a palpable erosion of checks and balances, restrictions on freedom of expression, and growing apprehension among religious minorities.

BJP ministers have vociferously pushed back against criticisms of India's democratic decay under Modi's leadership and launched attacks on independent democracy assessment entities such as Freedom House and Sweden's V-Dem Institute, which have downgraded India to statuses of "partly free" and "electoral autocracy," respectively.<sup>13</sup>

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are treading a comparable path. In Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has secured a series of overwhelming election triumphs, portraying herself as a technocratic figure akin to Lee Kuan Yew. The political landscape in Dhaka has long been dominated by two dynastic political factions led by Hasina and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, hindering the emergence of a more accountable democratic system. Similarly, Sri Lanka has embraced a dynastic politics model, both historically and more recently under the Rajapaksa brothers, Mahinda and Gotabaya. They rose to prominence by quashing the protracted Tamil insurgency through decisive military action, subsequently fostering close ties with China in exchange for substantial infrastructure projects such as the Hambantota Port. Once renowned as a beacon of democracy in South Asia, Sri Lanka's governance increasingly mirrors the illiberal autocracies prevalent elsewhere in the region. Presently, not only India but nearly all of South Asia, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, is classified as "partly free" or "not free" by Freedom House.<sup>14</sup>

Elsewhere, the Indo-Pacific region encompasses a diverse array of autocratic governance models. Alongside China, which by any metric stands as one of the most effective autocracies in history, are the "China lite" one-party communist systems of Vietnam and Laos. Furthermore, there are sultanistic regimes prevalent in Central Asia, as well as the oppressive family dynasty of North Korea, which holds the distinction of being the world's most authoritarian state. Other forms of autocratic rule include Cambodia's familial quasi-autocracy, with long-serving prime minister Hun Sen recently handing power to his son Manet; Myanmar's brutal military junta, which overthrew the re-elected National League for Democracy government in 2021; as well as one of the world's last remaining absolute monarchies in Brunei.

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<sup>13</sup> *Freedom in the World 2022; V-Dem, Defiance in the Face of Autocratization: Democracy Report 2023* (Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2023), <https://www.v-dem.net/>.

<sup>14</sup> *Freedom in the World 2022*.

This presents a mixed and possibly confusing picture, with lots of variation and little consistency, and underlines the point that there are very different kinds of autocratic regime. Like democracy, too often autocracy is treated as a binary concept rather than a spectrum. Yet there are some clear patterns discernible. As we contemplate the trajectory of the region in the coming decade, it is imperative to question the direction in which the trendlines are presently moving.

### **The Geography of Democracy in Asia**

First, let us delve into the geographical distribution of democracy in Asia. Since at least the end of the Cold War, there has been a clear maritime bias to the distribution of democratic governance in East Asia: with the exception of Mongolia, all of the region's electoral democracies—from Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in the north to the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Timor-Leste in the south—are littoral, insular or peninsula archipelagic states. If we encompass Australia and New Zealand, this correlation becomes even more pronounced. Most of these democracies along the Pacific rim maintain primary security ties with the United States, including the US treaty allies such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines.

Transitioning from maritime to mainland East Asia, China emerges as the central player, both today and over a very long history. Consider the profound historical legacy of China's "tribute" relations with its southern border states. Under Mao Zedong, the CCP also influenced the Leninist political trajectory of other one-party states like Vietnam and Laos, while continuing to exert significant influence over the military regimes of Thailand and Myanmar, as well as Cambodia.<sup>15</sup> Presently, under Xi Jinping's leadership, China not only amplifies its sway over these bordering states but also pursues broader dominance in East Asia. This entails threatening democratic Taiwan, exerting pressure on Japan, oscillating between rewarding and penalizing neighbors such as South Korea and Vietnam, establishing military installations in the South China Sea, and endeavoring to undermine US alliances.

Finally, in South Asia, India casts the longest shadow, exerting both positive and negative influences on the trajectory of democracy in its neighborhood. However, India's impact differs significantly from that of China or the United States. India's fraught and complex relations with Muslim-majority Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well as its uneven relationships with much smaller Nepal, Sri Lanka,

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<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Reilly, "Southeast Asia: In the Shadow of China," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 1 (January 2013): 156–64, <https://doi.org/>.

and Bhutan, make broad generalizations challenging. India has never actively sought to export its political system and, in fact, has been a somewhat ambivalent advocate of democracy, despite for decades being the developing world's standout example. In recent years, its internal shift away from the broad-tent inclusionary governance of the Congress Party to a more explicitly Hindu-oriented BJP has been the subject of much attention from commentators—albeit not necessarily from Western governments, which have largely played down India's drift towards illiberalism in deference to its role as a counterweight to China. Consequently, the emphasis on democracy in US Indo-Pacific policy and within the Quad's identity has, paradoxically, “also created a permissive space for illiberalism and democratic erosion in India, alongside tolerance for diversity in domestic governance models across the region.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Looking Ahead**

Over the next decade, it is foreseeable that the major powers—India, China, and the United States—will endeavor to sustain their dominance and considerable influence within their respective spheres of South Asia, mainland East Asia, and maritime East Asia. This continuity also implies that the prevailing regime types in each region will likely endure, characterized by a more democratically-leaning maritime East Asia, firmly tied to the US alliance, juxtaposed with a predominantly autocratic mainland East Asia that remains under China's influence. South Asia is the wildcard: hugely populous, diverse, and underdeveloped, democracy has never been stable there, but neither has outright authoritarianism. The multifarious countries of South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region may well be the swing states between autocratic and democratic futures for the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Assuming regime continuity in the United States, alignment between the United States and other Indo-Pacific democracies is also likely to persist. While the prospect of a second Trump administration may raise concerns among some allies, historical precedent indicates that, at the very least, security collaboration among allied democracies will remain a focal point of US foreign policy in Asia, irrespective of the governing administration.<sup>17</sup> Even during the Trump years, notwithstanding the president's own reservations regarding a values-driven foreign policy, key figures within his administration such as James Mattis and Michael Pompeo

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<sup>16</sup> Kate Sullivan de Estrada, “India and order transition in the Indo-Pacific: resisting the Quad as a ‘security community’,” *Pacific Review* 36, no. 2 (2023), 3, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Green and Dan Twining, “Democracy and American Grand Strategy in Asia: The Realist Principles Behind an Enduring Idealism,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 1 (April 2008): 1–28, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

staunchly defended Indo-Pacific democracy and condemned Chinese autocracy, a stance they maintain to date. For instance, Mattis recently asserted that the Quad “is grounded in common interests among the most important democracies in Asia. And it offers the best opportunity to lead a robust values-based partnership in the Indo-Pacific for those democracies and other like-minded nations . . . the real test of the Quad will be how it actually helps uphold the rule of law and stabilise Asia.”<sup>18</sup>

Since 2020, President Joe Biden has restored a more traditional US approach—prioritizing democratic allies, convening two Summits for Democracy, and renewing the focus on shared values. In the administration’s 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, strengthening and advocating for democracy are accorded significant prominence, to the extent that some analysts perceive it as the core objective of a comprehensive whole-of-government grand strategy for US diplomacy in the foreseeable future.<sup>19</sup>

Undoubtedly, the propagation of liberal values in Asia, though intermittent, provides the United States with a competitive advantage over China, affirming democracy promotion as a fundamental US interest.<sup>20</sup> However, this objective is undermined by the evident decline in the United States’ own democratic standing in recent years, measured against the same standards it applies to others—such as the imperative for peaceful transitions of power and the recognition of the freedom and fairness of electoral processes.<sup>21</sup>

As for China, it can be anticipated to persist in its support for North Korea and allied states like Cambodia and Pakistan, while resisting any developments that may bring democracy closer to its borders. For instance, it will continue to impede prospects for a unified Korea and the potential deployment of US forces in the region. Yet, akin to the United States, China’s primary challenge lies domestically. The unchallenged supremacy of the CCP hinges on its sustained performance legitimacy as well as its now well-developed ability to thwart and punish any threats to its authority. Despite numerous prognostications of its downfall, the CCP remains deeply entrenched today, with potential internal dissent or collective action closely monitored by an extensive surveillance apparatus. With a membership exceeding 90 million, the CCP is intricately interwoven into Chinese commerce and society, and despite recent economic setbacks, is likely to remain so. Nonetheless, it will need to evolve and relax some of its more egregious social controls in

<sup>18</sup> James Mattis, Michael Auslin, and Joseph Felter, “Getting the Quad Right Is Biden’s Most Important Job,” *Foreign Policy*, 10 March 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Cliff, *A New U.S. Strategy for the Indo-Pacific*, Special Report No. 86 (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asia Research, June 2020), <https://www.nbr.org/>.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Green and Dan Twining, “The Strategic Case for Democracy Promotion in Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, 23 January 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

<sup>21</sup> Thus, the Freedom House and V-Dem rankings that downgraded India also downgraded the United States.

the years ahead. Indeed, while Xi Jinping has dismissed the whole concept of competitive elections as “Western ideas,” he has also pledged to pursue the objective of “democracy with Chinese characteristics” by 2049, coinciding with the centenary of the PRC’s founding.

For years, comparative scholars have predicted that as China grows richer its politics will liberalize.<sup>22</sup> With a current per capita income of around USD 20,000 on a purchasing power parity basis—and even higher in coastal regions—China already surpasses income thresholds typically associated with democratic transitions.<sup>23</sup> Given the widely acknowledged role of the middle class—“no middle class, no democracy”—this should carry significant implications.<sup>24</sup> However, China’s burgeoning middle class seems to have predominantly accepted, and even endorsed, the paradigm of economic liberalization without corresponding political reforms. Surveys indicate that, especially among those with entrenched ties to state institutions, China’s middle class tends to exhibit greater allegiance to the CCP and less inclination toward democratic principles and institutions than their income levels would suggest—rendering them more frequently an adversary rather than an advocate of liberalization efforts.<sup>25</sup>

Given this context, the prospect of regime change in China seems remote. China’s economic prowess, coupled with its status as the primary trade partner for most Indo-Pacific nations, will bolster assertions that its autocratic political system, unlike messy democracy with its time-consuming checks and balances, can get things done more expediently. To the extent that China wins this debate, the repercussions will extend far beyond its immediate vicinity. Globally, the world has witnessed a “democratic recession” since 2006, characterized by a steady rise in illiberal regimes and outright autocracies, alongside a decline in genuine democracies.<sup>26</sup> This erosion of democratic principles is evident across all regions, including the Indo-Pacific.

Moreover, beyond the broader trend toward illiberalism, the faltering of once-promising democratic movements in Myanmar and Thailand, coupled with the persistence of autocracy in China, Vietnam, and other locales, underscores

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<sup>22</sup> Henry S. Rowen, “The Short March: China’s Road to Democracy,” *National Interest* 45 (Fall 1996): 61–70, <https://www.jstor.org/>; and Larry Diamond, “Why East Asia—Including China—Will Turn Democratic Within a Generation,” *The Atlantic*, 24 January 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>.

<sup>23</sup> Adam Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> See Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

<sup>25</sup> Jie Chen, *A Middle Class Without Democracy: Economic Growth and the Prospects for Democratization in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> *Freedom in the World 2022*.

the challenges of transitioning from military or other forms of authoritarian rule to authentic democratic governance. Nonetheless, democracy has seemingly solidified in South Korea and Taiwan, and appears poised to surpass the 25-year milestone in Timor-Leste and Indonesia—each of which was previously under autocratic rule.

Looking forward, the central question, as mentioned earlier, revolves around Taiwan's capacity to uphold its current status and remain a genuine democracy in the face of relentless pressure from China. Any regression from democracy in Taiwan would not only be strategically catastrophic but would also bolster claims of superiority by autocratic regimes. Although internal political polarization poses challenges and certain aspects of Taiwanese democracy remain subject to domestic contention, Taiwan has demonstrated remarkable resilience against Beijing's threats, intrusions, and "political warfare."<sup>27</sup> This resilience will be indispensable in the years ahead, particularly given the Democratic Progressive Party's triumph in the January 2024 elections is expected to provoke retaliation from the PRC.

Elsewhere, considering that China and some other authoritarian regimes in Asia have consistently defied the predictions of *modernization theory*—which posits that autocracies will transition to democracy once their income and development levels reach a certain threshold—it is plausible to anticipate that rapidly developing autocracies like Vietnam will likewise struggle to liberalize. On the other hand, comparative scholarship has also found that increasing incomes bolster the resilience of established democracies against external challenges, thereby diminishing the probability of these democracies regressing into authoritarianism.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, we should not expect many cases where a fully-functioning democracy turns authoritarian in any Indo-Pacific nation, nor vice versa. Absent regime collapse, North Korea is not going to become a liberal democracy; New Zealand will not turn into a military dictatorship. Rather, the most important ongoing trend in the Indo-Pacific is likely to be the steady shift towards more illiberal, quasi-democratic politics already seen in much of South and Southeast Asia. We can expect to see more dominant ruling parties endeavoring to sustain their authority through populist rhetoric and identity-driven mobilization, while simultaneously curtailing dissent from academia, civil society, and the media and using compliant judiciaries and internal security measures to safeguard their incumbency. How and where people get their information will be crucial, particularly as traditional media outlets become obsolete.

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<sup>27</sup> See Kerry Gershaneck, *Media Warfare: Taiwan's Battle for the Cognitive Domain* (Washington DC: Center for Security Policy, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development*.

Elections are unlikely to be abandoned; indeed, illiberal populists often enjoy popularity among the masses and typically ascend to power through democratic processes rather than coercion. However, they also tend to manipulate regulations to perpetuate their tenure, thereby corroding basic freedoms and impeding the ability of informed citizens to hold their leaders to account.

## Conclusion

If current illiberal trends persist, it is likely that the Indo-Pacific region cleaved between “free and repressive visions,” as the 2017 US *National Security Strategy* envisaged—but not between liberal democracy and dictatorial autocracies. Instead, pivotal swing states such as India, Indonesia, and Thailand may occupy an intermediate zone, exhibiting some democratic features (like regular elections) alongside repressive elements such as limitations on free speech). To the extent this continues, we are likely to see a bifurcated Indo-Pacific, characterized by democratic governance in the island chain spanning from Japan to New Zealand, an autocratic mainland Asia, and an illiberal Indian Ocean rim.

South Asia, situated uneasily between democracy and autocracy, may blend elements of both systems to ensure electoral dominance by parties representing religious majorities—such as Hindus in India, Muslims in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Indeed, this transition is already underway. Moreover, the traditional elite-dominated, patrimonial politics prevalent in Southeast Asian nations like Indonesia and the Philippines may coexist with emerging parties representing younger voters, akin to developments observed in Thailand and Malaysia.

Lurking in the background to these developments is the stability of the “democratic peace”: the empirical fact that genuine democracies almost never wage war against each other, in contrast to their frequent conflicts with illiberal regimes. Since at least Immanuel Kant’s eighteenth-century invocation of “perpetual peace,” modern political science has confirmed the statistical validity of this pattern: autocracies fight other autocracies, and democracies also engage in conflict with autocracies, but almost never with fellow democracies.<sup>29</sup> The Indo-Pacific has witnessed wars between democracies and autocracies—such as the Korean and Vietnam wars—and among autocracies (as seen in China’s 1979 invasion of Vietnam, following Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia), but never between two genuine democracies (the closest instance might be India’s 1987 intervention in the Sri Lankan Civil War).

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Doyle, *Liberal Peace: Selected Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

While the reasons for this regularity remain disputed, the concept of a democratic peace remains a foundational idea linking democracy and security.<sup>30</sup> However, it also presents a twist: can it apply to emerging or declining democracies as well as stable and established ones?<sup>31</sup> The evidence suggests caution. While long-term democracies are generally less susceptible to internal conflict and highly unlikely to engage in warfare with each other, comparative research indicates that countries undergoing the tumultuous process of *democratization* can become more prone to conflict, not less.<sup>32</sup> This does not discredit the democratic peace literature, which provides a statistically compelling rationale for fostering stable democracy, but it does raise questions. According to a recent overview by Dan Reiter, “One of the most indisputable, nontrivial, observed patterns in international relations is that democracies almost never fight each other.”<sup>33</sup> However, it remains uncertain whether this pattern equally applies to both liberal and illiberal democracies. The Indo-Pacific may be the arena in which we find out. ✪

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<sup>30</sup> David L. Rousseau et al., “Assessing the Dyadic Nature of the Democratic Peace, 1918–1988,” *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 3 (September 1996): 512–33, <https://doi.org/>

<sup>31</sup> Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and War,” *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (May–June 1995): 79–97, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>33</sup> Dan Reiter, “Is Democracy a Cause of Peace?,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 25 January 2017, <https://doi.org/>.