

Committee Secretary

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

PO Box 6021, Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600

Inquiry into supporting democracy in our region

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry into supporting democracy in our region.

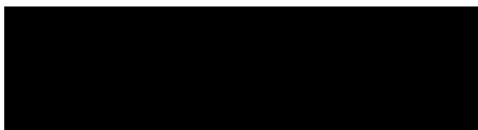
Peace and stability in Australia's region goes to the heart of Australia's own security, prosperity and national interest. It is clearly in Australia's interest to shape a region where a vibrant civil society supports good governance. The weakening of democratic governance, civil society and human rights poses a challenge to Australian interests in preserving a secure and prosperous region that supports human freedoms and social and economic flourishing.

While development, diplomacy and defence are all important elements of foreign policy, none alone are sufficient to confront these challenges. Australia can maximise its ability to influence by better coordinating these tools of statecraft. An integrated approach to foreign policy enhances Australia's ability to partner with regional countries to support democracy.

This submission draws on consultations with almost 250 development, diplomacy and defence experts conducted by the Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue (AP4D) during 2021-22 to produce options papers on shaping a shared future with Southeast Asia and the Pacific (available at <https://www.asiapacific4d.com/sharedfuture>). Views expressed cannot be attributed to any individuals or organisations involved in the process.

The Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue (AP4D) creates a new dimension in Australia's international policymaking by bringing together and combining the skills and experiences of the development, diplomacy and defence communities to achieve new insights, develop new ideas and promote strategic collaboration around shared interests. It is a platform for ideas that encourage more integrated statecraft that can maximise Australia's ability to influence regional and global developments.

Yours sincerely,



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Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue (AP4D)



Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue submission to the JSCFADT Inquiry into supporting democracy in our region

While Australia is prosperous and seemingly secure, many of its longstanding international assets and advantages are eroding. Positive trends that for decades favoured geopolitical stability, democratic advancement, open economies and tolerant societies have stalled or reversed.

If Australia is serious about deeper engagement and wants the region to become more open, democratic and rules-based it will require a 'full court press' on a much larger scale, consistently pursued over many years.

There are specific areas in which Australia is well-placed to support democracy in Southeast Asia and the Pacific:

- ***Civil-military collaboration***

While Australia has sometimes been cautious about emphasising liberal values of democracy and human rights in its foreign policy, its strong civil-military collaboration and governance framework represents an avenue through which it can enhance and expand its engagement in the region. This is particularly relevant against the backdrop of rising authoritarianism in the region. Australia can be a catalyst for civil-military cooperation by modelling positive behaviour and building civil society links. Australia has an important role in promoting civil-military collaboration to strengthen effective whole-of-nation responses to humanitarian and security issues. For example, Australia could implement a Regional Military/Civil Society framework to manage Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in Southeast to prepare the Australian Defence Force and regional military partners for future operations while promoting a model and culture for regional militaries within their societies.

- ***Civil society***

Australia should comprehensively invest in civic space involving increased funding directly to civil society individuals and entities, strengthening free media and supporting actors that foster open states and free and fair elections. Australia is deeply connected with the region at the community level. Individual connections provide a unique opportunity that can be leveraged to pursue Australian policy objectives. A policy approach focusing on civil society collaborations will enable Australia to more effectively engage in the region. Australia-based diasporas are conduits in creating linkages of development and business collaborations while significant numbers of Australians work within civil society organisations alongside local civil society counterparts. They have established long-lasting and trusted relationships with current and emerging social and political leaders. A systematic and coherent approach to leveraging such influential connections should be central to Australia's policy. Given that civil society actors can be viewed as critics and opponents by regional governments, it is important that Australia's commitment to democratic and human rights values be communicated with sensitivity and diplomacy when engaging such actors in defence, diplomatic and development programs.

- ***Supporting good governance***

Strengthening democratic norms and good governance is vital to Australia's interests. Australia should expand its investments in civil society, media and other socio-political institutions critical to countering external influence, in a way that is respectful of sovereignty. Support to increase

women's political participation and representation is critical to enabling good governance and democracy. Countries that have the pillars of peace – such as well-functioning governments, low corruption and strong connections between government and societal forms of governance – have higher resilience to counter threats. For example, in the Pacific Australia should strengthen democratic norms and good governance through increased support for journalism, supporting mainstream media as an important source of debate and information and their ability to report accurately and safely as well as bolstering online forums for information and debate.

- ***Digital resilience and cyber security***

Technology has the potential to undermine democracy and poses increasing risks to freedom of expression as governments may seek to exert control over digital media. It is in Australia's interest to reinforce norms and democratic values in the digital space. Increasing access to these technologies, both by governments and citizens, requires attention to how technologies are used and how some governments might be tempted to seek to use them. Australia should ensure human rights discussions are part of engaging with counterparts on cyber and digital policy and legislative development. Working to support freedom of expression and other key democratic principles not only promotes Australian values, but also protect the rights of citizens. There is an important role for Australia to play on cyber security in helping to counter disinformation and its effect on democratic backsliding, as well as addressing the misuse of technology for human rights abuses.

- ***Autonomous sanctions regime***

Australia should expand the use of its updated autonomous sanctions regime, which provides avenues to promote good governance and disincentivise democratic backsliding regionally by targeting regime figures guilty of corruption and human rights abuses while sparing citizens from the negative impacts of uniform sanctions. This could involve greater cooperative partnerships with civil society organisations across the region, helping to maintain human security partnerships with peoples across the region especially in countries where governments are not representative of their citizens.