

# *Sunnylands Initiative* Statement in Indonesia

FEBRUARY 25, 2025

Thought leaders from Australia, Japan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and the United States met in Indonesia on February 24–25, 2025 to discuss challenges, opportunities and action plans for advancing democratic norms and governance in the Indo-Pacific.

In marking five years since first meeting in California in 2020, the participants agreed that the Sunnylands Initiative on Enhancing Democratic Partnership in the Indo-Pacific remains vital and the democratic dividend is clear: democracies deliver greater security, economic growth, stability and global prosperity than any other form of governance.

Nonetheless, the challenges to democratic governance have undoubtedly increased. While more Asians voted in elections in 2024 than ever before, rising geopolitical tensions and economic anxiety have seen an emphasis on relative gains and the centralization of power rather than the strengthening of democratic governance. This has only been exacerbated by technology, persistent corruption, the closing of civil society spaces, and disinformation by malign actors aiming to undermine trust in democracy. Participants also noted uncertainty about the future of US leadership in support of democratic norms.

At the same time, participants noted reasons for encouragement and optimism: democratic governance remains a priority for citizens and thought leaders across the Indo-Pacific who have demonstrated through their actions that free elections, human rights and women's empowerment are compatible with the region's diverse religions and cultures.

This fact is evident in the innovative programs begun in concert with the Sunnylands Initiative to bolster regional ownership of the agenda for advancing democratic governance, including:

- The Indo-Pacific Democracy Forum in South Korea which is raising the country's interest in supporting the region's democratic governance and helping activate public and private sector funding for such efforts
- The Democracy Advocates at Risk program in Japan which is bringing together dozens of scholars from eight Indo-Pacific countries to support democracy advocates whose lives are at risk
- The Indo-Pacific Platform for Universal Values based in Japan which is fostering networks of democratic leaders, civil society organisations and media
- Novel parliamentary engagements among Japanese Diet members and South Korean National Assembly members
- New regional cooperation and partnerships in support of increasing the sovereignty of Pacific Islands Forum member nations

Recognizing the successes of the Sunnylands Initiative over five years, participants reaffirmed their commitment to the endeavor as an indispensable platform for aligning efforts and sharing best practices for bolstering democratic governance in the region. Whether this is through the impactful voice of the initiative's thought leaders or the regional efforts by Japan, South Korea, the Pacific Islands Forum and Inter-Parliamentary dialogues, the Sunnylands Initiative has delivered upon its 2020 aspirations even as further challenges lie ahead.

While partners across the Indo-Pacific have taken increased ownership to advance the original Sunnylands Initiative, participants in Indonesia emphasized that the US role in support of this work — ranging from convening power and technical expertise to geopolitical weight and resources — remains absolutely vital. Continued US support for more robust democratic governance in the Indo-Pacific would not only be in the nation's self-interest, doing so would also align with US public opinion: a recent survey found that 77% of Americans agree that the United States has "a moral obligation to stand up for human rights and democracy whenever possible in international affairs".

Amid global uncertainties, this is a decisive moment for democratic solidarity and leadership — not retreat. In order to increase the strategic impact of efforts reviewed at Sunnylands, the participants agreed to:

- Continue demonstrating a shared sense of purpose despite ever-changing political contexts
- Focus on catalytic opportunities, particularly through strengthening the connections among diverse legislative groups and democracy advocates
- Enhance engagements with important stakeholders including youth, women and leaders of religious organizations, education institutions, and think tanks

Recognizing that democratic solidarity is not just a matter for today's elected leaders but is an issue of shared values among societies and peoples, the Sunnylands Initiative pledged to meet again for a planning session in Seoul in 2025 and plenary in 2026.

Signed,

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**Dewi Fortuna Anwar**

Chair of the Board of Directors, The Habibie Center

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**Derek Mitchell**

Senior Adviser, Center for Strategic & International Studies

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**Conchita Carpio-Morales**

Former Ombudsman, Republic of the Philippines

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**Jared Mondschein**

Research Director, United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney

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**Kathleen Doherty**

Chief Strategy Officer, The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands

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**Marty Natalegawa**

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Indonesia

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**I Ketut Putra Erawan**

Executive Director, Institute for Peace and Democracy

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**Ooi Kok Hin**

Former Executive Director, Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, Malaysia

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**Michael J. Green**

CEO, United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney

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**Fuadi Pitsuwan**

President, Surin Pitsuwan Foundation

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**Virgilio da Silva Guterres**

Ombudsman for Human Rights and Justice of Timor-Leste, International Ombudsman Institute

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**Dinna Prapto Raharja**

Executive Director, Synergy Policies

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**Maiko Ichihara**

Professor, Institute for Global Governance Research, Graduate School of Law, School of International and Public Policy, Hitotsubashi University

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**Amina Rasul**

President, Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy

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**Lynn Lee**

Director, East Asia & Regional Programs, National Endowment for Democracy

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**Jacob Schlesinger**

President & CEO, United States-Japan Foundation

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**Sook Jong Lee**

Representative of Asia Democracy Research Network, and Representative of Indo-Pacific Democracy Forum

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**Kak-soo Shin**

Former Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea

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**Yukio Takasu**

Representative, Indo-Pacific Platform for Universal Values, and Former Permanent Representative of Japan to the United Nations

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**Yeh-Chung Lu**

Professor and Vice Dean, College of International Affairs, National Cheng-chi University, Taiwan

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**Hyun-Seok Yu**

Former Korean Ambassador to Malaysia