INTRODUCTION

In the Indo-Pacific region, democracy is strongly established in several countries and is taking root in others. Some of the region’s democracies—Australia, Japan, Indonesia, Taiwan, and New Zealand—have shown great resilience and progress in combating Covid-19. The successful response to Covid-19 by established democracies in the Indo-Pacific provides a powerful counterpoint to those who argue authoritarian countries alone can manage this kind of external shock. This should come as no surprise as the Indo-Pacific is the only region that has seen recent overall improvements in freedom, even as the last decade has seen global declines. The region’s democracies have made significant progress in advancing democratic values, even as they may differ in meaning, and have even produced broad programming to support good governance practices. An increasingly aggressive and assertive China and the Covid-19 pandemic threaten to destabilize these governance gains, which would disrupt weaker states and stoke potential for spill-over effects to occur in other Indo-Pacific countries.

The Indo-Pacific region is an increasingly contested geopolitical theater between China and the United States. China’s efforts to undermine trust in democratic institutions and promote an alternative form of government—authoritarian capitalism—is a stark contrast to U.S. democratic and free-market values. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has developed a multisectoral approach for the region under the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS); however, the economic fallout and frustration from Covid-19 threatens to disrupt several of the governance objectives as part of the agency’s strategy. As a result, USAID must adapt its strategy to better address the unique challenges that the pandemic has created, including further democratic backsliding, human rights abuses, corruption, and malign foreign influence and disinformation. This brief focuses on the role that USAID can play in promoting the
governance pillar of the IPS, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

**PRE-PANDEMIC U.S. STRATEGY TOWARD THE INDO-PACIFIC**

The United States has long been a leading power in the Indo-Pacific region. Since the end of World War II, the United States formalized its position through a series of treaty relationships with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand. The U.S. security relationship with these countries is bolstered by its deep and extensive economic relationships. China's rise as a global superpower and economic powerhouse has prompted the United States to reemphasize the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region, with Beijing seeking to counter U.S. influence and undermine U.S. partner relationships in the region. The Obama administration laid the groundwork for the U.S. rebalance in Asia and the Pacific by seeking to strengthen traditional alliances as well as preexisting trade and economic ties. The Trump administration has continued this shift in Indo-Pacific priorities as it also views China's geopolitical rise as a direct threat to U.S. leadership in the region.

As China evolves into a globally driven, authoritarian power, democracies in the region—both weak and strong—face severe threats. China offers an alternative to democratic, free-market principles by providing state-to-

---

**Figure 1: Covid-19 Cases in the Indo-Pacific Region**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>1,038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>3,410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>19,077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>56,666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Philippines</td>
<td>209,544</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papua New Guinea</td>
<td>453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palau</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>1,714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshall Islands</td>
<td>7,329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>9,306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>66,499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>165,877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>3,387,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federated States of Micronesia</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>89,814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>306,794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>25,448</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

state lending, largely focused on infrastructure projects that are desperately needed in developing countries, often at record scale and speed. The nation has taken an indirect approach to establish its “community of shared destiny” through extensive peripheral diplomacy and infrastructure development projects throughout the region, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Expenditures for the BRI, launched in 2013, are estimated to reach $1.2–$1.3 trillion by 2027, mostly concentrated in Asia and the Pacific. The BRI spans over 70 countries and has been likened to a modern-day Silk Road.

Since the ascent of President Xi Jinping in 2013, China has increased its diplomatic, military, and economic aggression in the Indo-Pacific region. Beijing’s competitive economic advantage targets developing countries, many of which are weak or nascent democracies, and offers a “new option” for countries looking to expedite economic development. The Chinese government may not explicitly transform democracies into autocracies; however, China frequently works with autocratic leaders when it serves its interests. President Xi has a particularly strong relationship with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, and in June 2020, he secured a statement of support from President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines—both of whom are leaders that have overseen democratic backsliding and increases in autocratic measures in their own countries. These close relations also help solidify authoritarian leaders’ control, as China often provides multipurpose technology, including surveillance technology.

To respond to Chinese assertiveness, the U.S. government has developed a new strategy for the region, which stretches from India to the Pacific Islands and from Northeast Asia to New Zealand. In November 2017, President Trump outlined a “vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific.” The 2017 National Security Strategy identified the Indo-Pacific as a scene of “geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order.” The United States Departments of State and Defense, with contributions from USAID, have since released their own strategy documents focused on the Indo-Pacific, identifying three pillars to the U.S. approach. The governance pillar focuses on transparency, respect for human rights, and democracy. The economic pillar emphasizes the importance of free trade and the role of governments in enabling free-market enterprise. The security pillar seeks to build a network of U.S. partners in the region to deter adversaries, counter transnational crime, protect freedom of navigation, and preserve the environment. Partners in the region have followed the United States’ lead with their own concepts and policies for the region. Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept, India’s Act East Policy, Australia’s Indo-Pacific concept, the Republic of Korea’s New Southern Policy, and Taiwan’s New Southbound Policy are among the most prominent, reaffirming regional support for U.S. principles.

While China’s new ambitions and influence in the region have taken grip in some countries, such as Cambodia, the interagency Indo-Pacific Transparency Initiative (IPTI), announced by Vice President Michael Pence in 2018, seeks to combat the rising pressure on the region’s democracies. The IPTI seeks to “promote civil society, the rule of law, and transparent and accountable governance in the Indo-Pacific region.” The United States has established over 200 programs, totaling approximately $210 million annually in IPTI programming. Some of the regional achievements of USAID through this initiative include: increasing legal aid for people from marginalized communities by more than tenfold in Indonesia; supporting the authorization of nine laws to improve the integrity of the electoral process in Nepal and; launching a national plan to combat corruption and bribery in Sri Lanka.

The work of USAID and other U.S. government agencies under the Indo-Pacific Strategy focuses on strengthening institutional and fiscal integrity, political and electoral system integrity, and informational integrity, as well as strengthening human rights and promoting social attitudes that reinforce democratic systems. However, given the Covid-19 pandemic, there is unprecedented pressure on democratic systems globally and a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable and marginalized populations, which makes the governance challenges in the Indo-Pacific uniquely difficult.

GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES FOR THE INDO-PACIFIC IN THE FACE OF COVID-19

In early 2020, Covid-19 began to spread around the Indo-Pacific region from its origin in China. While the primary effects of the novel coronavirus have targeted health care systems and economies, the pandemic has also exacerbated existing governance challenges, such as democratic backsliding, human rights abuses, pervasive corruption, and malign foreign influence. Covid-19 has helped facilitate authoritarianism by giving governments an excuse to impose draconian measures that restrict movement and expression, disempower local governments, limit public protests, increase
invasive surveillance through contract tracing and mobile apps, and delay elections. These measures have occurred under the guise of public health concerns and have the potential to erode civil society and public trust in the region and beyond.

Many authoritarian governments lack the necessary preconditions to establish an effective response to Covid-19. Authoritarian powers often lack integrated governance capable of imposing a consistent response on all levels from the top to local levels. Covid-19 threatens the legitimacy of authoritarian powers, as they have been unable to send a message of strength, with some even evading acknowledgment of the virus at all. As Covid-19 has threatened the trust, legitimacy, and power of authoritarian regimes, many have responded to reinstate this lost power, leveraging the crisis to double down on suppressive restrictions that ultimately threaten the long-term security and stability of their regime.

The increase in authoritarian norms and modes of governance in the last decade is a growing global phenomenon and a threat to U.S. national interests. While the Indo-Pacific region’s established democracies are demonstrating resilience, its newest and weakest democracies have seen regression in civil liberties and political rights, particularly from rising trends of autocracy, disinformation, political coercion, human rights violations, and corruption. The trends in the Indo-Pacific, along with China’s growing regional influence, inhibit democratic consolidation and threaten to undermine the great progress the United States has made to promote the sovereignty and independence of the region’s democracies. Democratic backsliding in the region was a preexisting condition that will only worsen because of the Covid-19 pandemic. In weak democracies, opportunities for corruption will create the impression that democratic governments and institutions are unable to cope with the pressures created by the pandemic. This will be further exacerbated by malign actors like China, who will seek to spread disinformation through digital and social media.

In response to the present reality, the U.S. government must work with its partners in the region to prevent further backsliding by emerging democracies. This will require greater support for programs that build transparency and accountability through strengthening existing government institutions and mechanisms, greater engagement with civil society, and a renewed emphasis on upholding human rights and civil liberties.

**DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING**

The Covid-19 pandemic is testing the resiliency of democracies in the Indo-Pacific. Several government leaders in the region have expanded their executive authority, jailed political opponents, restricted freedom of expression, delayed elections, and increased the role of the military, which could have far-reaching (and possibly long-term) consequences for the future of democracy in the Indo-Pacific. The uncertain and chaotic nature of a pandemic lends an easy justification to leaders who want to centralize power. Suspending elections is easier to explain when health and safety are at stake, and political leaders can justify the need for military on the streets in terms of preserving public health.

There are already plenty of examples of Covid-related democratic backsliding in the region. In Sri Lanka, newly elected President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a former army officer, has appointed military officers to key posts in government and has assigned them the role of enforcing quarantines and overseeing Covid-19 contact tracing. President Rajapaksa’s political party scored a parliamentary majority victory on August 5, which could further empower the government to crackdown on journalists and expressions of freedom through its arrest of government critics. According to Human Rights Watch, over 66,000 people have been arrested in Sri Lanka for allegedly violating Covid-19 curfew requirements.

In Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand, leaders have also cracked down on political opponents and online critics. In the Philippines—a de facto democracy—journalists operate in an already hostile environment and face potential imprisonment for criticism of the government. The suppression of press freedom and expression of dissent are continuations of pre-Covid democratic backsliding. President Rodrigo Duterte, in particular, has granted himself “special temporary power.” The Philippines has imposed one of the longest and most restrictive lockdowns in the region after Duterte placed the entire country under “enhanced community quarantine.” Reports estimate that over 30,000 people were arrested for violating quarantine in the first month of the lockdown alone. In addition, the recent conviction of journalist Maria Ressa for cyber libel, despite a lack of evidence to support the charges and the closure of ABS-CBN, the country’s largest broadcast network, illustrate a continuation of the decline in media freedom since Duterte took power in the Philippines.

There is a chance that Covid-19 will punish ineffective governments and reward those that have responded strongly
to the virus. In the Indo-Pacific, democracies such as South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, New Zealand, and Australia have handled the pandemic well, but so has the one-party state of Singapore and the one-party authoritarian regime in Vietnam. Meanwhile, emerging democracies such as the Philippines and Indonesia have mismanaged the pandemic, and China’s handling of the virus remains mired in controversy. The stark contrast of how democracies in the region have successfully contained and responded to Covid-19 compared to China, discredits China’s propaganda that more centralized, authoritarian forms of government are more adept to handling crises.

Despite its mishandling and attempted cover-up of Covid-19 at the onset of the outbreak, China continues to claim that it has dealt with the crisis more effectively than other wealthy, developed democracies in the region. China’s propaganda campaign praises the government and its citizens’ response to Covid-19, with no mention of bureaucratic troubles or efforts to initially hide the virus outbreak. In claiming a triumph in its response to Covid-19, China is positioning its authoritarian model of governance in direct opposition to the response of Taiwan and South Korea that have been praised for their efficient responses to the pandemic. China’s propaganda about its handling of Covid-19 also serves to reinforce the perceived success of other authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states in the region, such as Vietnam.

VIETNAM’S RESPONSE TO COVID-19
Vietnam has been recognized as one of the few early Covid-19 success cases due to its preparedness and early targeted prevention and containment strategy. While its prior experiences with SARS and avian influenza prepared and informed its response, even prior to its first reported cases of Covid-19, Vietnam took preventative measures such as imposing travel restrictions. The Vietnamese government also provided clear public health messaging that emphasized the dangers and seriousness of the virus rather than downplaying or even ignoring it, as many other governments did. Vietnam quickly established detection and containment measures such as government-run quarantine centers (based on possible exposure rather than just symptoms), disinformation fines, contact tracing apps, community-level lockdowns, and nationwide testing centers to identify clusters before their spread and performed more tests than cases than any other country. Overall, Vietnam’s transparent, responsible, effective, and early response encouraged citizen trust and compliance and thus enabled its extensive success.

CORRUPTION
Covid-19 has increased opportunities for corruption in the Indo-Pacific, as governments hastily respond to economic shocks and pass emergency measures. Corruption was already a pervasive problem in the Indo-Pacific, but given the larger role of government in distributing services, incentives for corrupt officials to demand bribes and kickbacks have increased. In addition, while international partners rush to disburse aid packages, they are less likely to include key corruption controls. With a lack of oversight over public finances, corruption in public spending is likely to increase, which ultimately deteriorates governments’ responses to the pandemic.

While the extent of corruption during the pandemic has yet to be fully documented, several instances in the Indo-Pacific have been reported. In the Philippines, a video in which a municipal official revealed that he was distributing only half of Covid-related aid funds to the intended beneficiaries generated public outrage and a national investigation. It is too early to estimate how much Covid-related aid will be diverted to corruption. However, previous aid packages, such as the funds following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, demonstrate that corruption is avoidable when stakeholders view corruption “not as a nuisance or unfortunate side effect of the recovery, but as a core threat to the reconstruction effort as a whole.” Donors and local partners will need to take appropriate action to ensure that corruption does not reinforce existing corrosive trends that would further undermine good governance and public oversight.

MALIGN FOREIGN INFLUENCE AND DISINFORMATION
In efforts to reestablish its global position of power and redirect its global narrative as the Covid-19 epicenter, China has deployed numerous disinformation campaigns and vaccine propaganda. The Covid-19 pandemic presents
China with several avenues to project its influence. First, Beijing has ramped up a campaign of “mask diplomacy,” shipping personal protective equipment (PPE) to foreign countries to gain sympathy. Second, Chinese leaders have selectively released information to portray their response to Covid-19, and by extension, their system of government in a positive light. Third, as countries look to monitor their citizens for contact tracing and quarantines, China has an opportunity to export their tools for digital surveillance.

China has manufactured and spread disinformation about the Covid-19 crisis in a myriad number of ways. In the most prominent case, in March 2020, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian retweeted a conspiracy theory that the Covid-19 virus had been created in a U.S. laboratory. Disinformation has also been more subtle, however. The Oxford Internet Institute analyzed disinformation published by state-backed outlets from China, Iran, Russia, and Turkey, finding that their content published in European languages often had higher average engagement per article than publications such as Le Monde, Der Speigel, and El País. China also amplified fake text messages and social media posts that said that President Trump was declaring a national lockdown. Social media platforms such as Twitter have swiftly responded to the Chinese disinformation efforts, classifying 23,750 accounts as “spreading geopolitical narratives favorable to the Communist Party of China (CCP).”

In promoting false narratives surrounding Covid-19 on social media, China is hoping to depict itself as a reasonable stakeholder in the international community to increase its global reach.

In Taiwan, there have been numerous examples of Chinese influence to use disinformation surrounding Covid-19 to question science and institutions, and thereby fragment Taiwanese society. For example, the Chinese launched a coordinated social media campaign, citing unnamed members of the Taiwanese parliament about a massive cover up in terms of infections and deaths. The objective of the campaign was to sow distrust in Taiwanese health institutions. A digital intelligence lab based in California traced back this claim to a coordinated disinformation campaign with origins in China that was sent out over the Chinese app, Weibo. The Chinese government, therefore, has the capacity and willingness to employ disinformation tactics against democratic societies by leveraging the opportunities presented by Covid-19.
for example, took advantage of the pandemic by imposing a new security law in Hong Kong, permitting the central government to try residents in Hong Kong for certain crimes on the mainland.\textsuperscript{41} Beijing has also increased surveillance, suppressed information related to the virus, and escalated an existing crackdown on virtual private networks (VPNs), which allow users to access content that has been censored by the central government.\textsuperscript{42, 43} Meanwhile, in Myanmar, the government has prioritized Buddhists, the ethnic majority, for Covid-19 treatment and broken its own ceasefire against separatists.\textsuperscript{44, 45} Cambodia has placed restrictions on social, political, and press activities; in fact, Cambodia’s parliament passed a state of emergency law, which states that the King can declare a state of emergency in a barrage of situations, including pandemics. This law allows the government to control the national security, public order, the digital surveillance of its citizens, and seek retribution against those who do not follow orders.\textsuperscript{46}

In Sri Lanka, India, and Cambodia, discrimination against Muslims has increased as unfounded claims/allegations blaming them for spreading the virus have become widespread. There are some reports that businesses have been boycotted or Muslims have been denied medical care. In Sri Lanka, Muslim families have reported their deceased loved ones have been forced to have cremations, which go against Islamic practice.\textsuperscript{47} India’s Muslim minority had already been facing increasing discrimination and threats before Covid-19, as violence broke out earlier this year between Hindus and Muslims in the Indian capital city of New Delhi. Social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter have been platforms for anti-Muslim rhetoric as slurs and hashtags falsely accusing Muslims of spreading Covid-19 have been circulated.\textsuperscript{48}

In Thailand—a country that has experienced 12 military coups since 1932—pro-democracy protestors demanded Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha’s resignation and constitutional changes. Failed promises to restore democracy and the repression of civil rights have fueled the anti-government protests and led to calls for reforms to the monarchy. Covid-19 has provided fodder for the largest pro-democracy movement since Prayuth took power in a coup in 2014 and has galvanized urban demonstrators in historical numbers.\textsuperscript{49} The pandemic is worsening the treatment of ethnic minorities and furthering scapegoating and xenophobic attitudes that empower the ruling majority—undermining social order and potentially fueling massive social unrest if left unresolved.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR USAID INVOLVEMENT IN THE POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY

Covid-19 has disrupted current USAID programming and has shifted priorities in the short-term toward strengthening health care institutions, emergency responses, and governance issues to prevent development backsliding.\textsuperscript{50} While funds have been diverted to mitigate the short-term effects of Covid-19, USAID must also consider that the increase in governance challenges in the Indo-Pacific will continue after the pandemic and will require additional future programming and consideration. This will require prioritizing several challenges to preserve the important work USAID has done to assist countries in actualizing their self-reliance and strengthening their democratic institutions:

1. **Promote Government Transparency, Oversight, and Accountability Measures**

   Corruption was a pervasive issue pre-pandemic and has become more rampant as public funds with little oversight are quickly disseminated for emergency responses. Combating corruption requires greater public engagement on issues of transparency and government accountability, as well as controlling corruption when it occurs. USAID must continue this work in its partner countries (i.e., Indonesia and Bangladesh), while recognizing Covid-19 has allowed for opportunities for corruption. USAID should be prioritizing its open and accountable governance metric as part of its ongoing Journey to Self-Reliance program, with special attention to public procurement, health care supplies, and emergency aid packages.

   USAID should establish more programming that strengthens oversight and ensures a higher degree of accountability and restores confidence in public and national institutions. Public financial management, as well as transparency and accountability principles, could be implemented into the USAID health and education programming. Furthermore, bolstering country capacity to investigate, prosecute, and sanction Covid-19-related corruption—including strengthening anti-corruption and anti-money laundering frameworks—will allow countries to respond to corruption more effectively in the future.

   USAID’s work should go beyond ensuring that Covid-19 emergency funding is being spent for its intended purposes by modifying its programs to place more reform and transparency measures in the countries that are most susceptible to Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Globally, pro-democratic movements are
already demanding accountability and transparency to explain the origins of Covid-19 and why it has had worse effects in certain locations than others. USAID and local organizations can channel that impulse against corruption, explaining to the public that corrupt institutions are more likely to hire incompetent, but well-connected bureaucrats and remove funds from the areas where they are needed most. Local partner and group relationships will become increasingly important as they can garner public trust and knowledge. Additionally, U.S. Foreign Service Officers located in-country should develop strong relationships with people in the civil service who are willing to identify, publicize, and punish corrupt acts, gradually pushing their institutions toward greater transparency.

2. WORK WITH GLOBAL DEMOCRACIES TO MAKE A RENEWED CASE FOR DEMOCRACY

To strengthen the coalition of democratic countries in the Indo-Pacific, USAID should help highlight how democratic responses to Covid-19 in the region have often been more effective than non-democratic responses. This could be done by sponsoring a regional event on the topic, bringing together the experiences of South Korea, Japan, New Zealand, Taiwan, and Australia. The purpose of the event would be to share best practices amongst democracies in the Indo-Pacific that could be translated more broadly to the international democracy community and produce new opportunities for multinational coordination. This would act as a powerful counternarrative to China and solidify U.S. support for democratic values abroad.

Democratic institutions have been undermined due to Covid-19 and are at risk of further degradation. Free and fair elections—one of the cornerstones of a healthy democracy—are another area where USAID can provide assistance to local partners or electoral commission boards. USAID should consider expanding its work with non-profits that have extensive election observation expertise. With over 100 elections in 61 countries postponed from Covid-19, USAID should support local partners to monitor upcoming and rescheduled elections to ensure the voting processes are transparent and free from manipulation. Through targeted messaging, USAID could highlight the success of the South Korean election during the Covid-19 pandemic to demonstrate the value of voting without the need for military or police presence. Election assistance and monitoring in the context of a pandemic will be essential to ensuring a peaceful transition of power and maintaining the integrity of democratic institutions.

3. BOLSTERING SUPPORT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society is paramount in holding government leaders accountable and preventing corruption. Covid-19 presents an opportunity for USAID to create and deploy technology that helps empower citizens and civic society. USAID should increase measures to support civil society, given that civic groups are playing a valuable role in many countries’ pandemic responses. This new vitality of civil society may help civil society re-legitimate itself and further the momentum post-Covid. USAID can also make sure that new aid packages for Covid-19 relief include provisions that ensure civil society will be given a role in helping implement and monitor relief packages.

USAID can continue to partner with local organizations to strengthen the ability for civil society to become a trusted source of information and resource hub. Working in Nepal with civil society organizations, USAID was instrumental in developing many policies and holding public forums that enabled legislators to garner input on draft legislation that eventually helped strengthen the electoral process. USAID may also consider membership-based organizations, which are common across South Asia, as partners, in addition to more traditional NGOs. The United States can connect civil society organizations across countries to share best practices in the face of Covid-19, and they might even contemplate sharing aid agreements directly with civil society organizations if governments are insufficiently democratic.

4. EFFECTIVELY COUNTER CHINESE DISINFORMATION AND PROMOTE FACT-CHECKING MECHANISMS

Digital authoritarianism threatens to undermine democratic institutions and trusted sources of information. Covid-19 has created new opportunities for disinformation as science and public health advice are distorted. In particular, China’s efforts to promote a false narrative of an effective response to Covid-19 are indicative of its broader anti-democratic messaging.

USAID, in partnership with civil society organizations and NGOs, should continue to invest in the digital influence of local partners. In doing so, USAID funding will go toward increasing awareness and skepticism of China’s actions in partner countries and bolster the capacity to respond to misinformation. USAID should continue to help countries develop capabilities to process, analyze, and mobilize information. In doing so, USAID can invest and mobilize countries on their journey to self-reliance, but also respond to the disinformation vestiges of the
pandemic and empower society, institutions, and the private sector to address the sources of disinformation and effectively respond.

USAID could partner with civil society organizations that possess the resources to fact check information and quickly correct fake news stories that are promoted by China or likeminded actors. The private sector can help in many cases; social media companies, for example, can flag content that is unreliable or that fails an independent fact check, as Twitter has recently done. As media independence is further eroded, USAID should increase funding for capacity building for local, trusted, and independent newspapers. Government institutions also need to be much better equipped and able to rapidly respond and reach a large number of people with responses and clarifications on the news and public health information. To further decrease the power that disinformation has, USAID should consider additional funding for media literacy programs and news cooperatives, like in 2018, when the United States and Taiwan cohosted an International Workshop on Defending Democracy through Media Literacy.51 These programs can help foster strategic leadership that understands how to interpret and apply metrics for disinformation. Equipping citizens with the skills to recognize and analyze disinformation will make them less susceptible to Chinese disinformation efforts.

**CONCLUSION**

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing governance challenges and has created new opportunities for authoritarianism. Democracy and the U.S.-led liberal international order are being questioned by malign actors and governments. A major global disruptor, Covid-19 has given governments an excuse to enact sweeping measures that restrict freedom of movement and expression, as well as undermine universal human rights. Distrust in government leaders, scapegoating, and xenophobic attitudes toward certain groups and communities have increased. Meanwhile, countries and communities are more vulnerable to disinformation and the weaponization of crucial public health statistics. While some of these trends existed before the pandemic, Covid-19 has emboldened strongman leaders, which has fed the flames of pro-democracy protest movements. There is an opportunity now to build back better democratic institutions and governance structures that include civil society, fact-checking mechanisms, independent judiciaries, and greater government oversight and accountability.

To counter growing threats to democracy, the United States and its allies must band together to share lessons and craft a pro-democratic approach to the Covid-19 pandemic, one that champions accountability, transparency, and the protection of human rights. Foreign assistance spending and programming such as the IPTI are more important than ever. China’s promotion of disinformation and propaganda threatens established democracies in the Indo-Pacific and globally, undermining U.S. interests and democratic values. The United States must lead by example to other democracies globally, reassure allies in the Indo-Pacific that it is a reliable and trusted partner, and project confidence in its own democratic institutions.

Daniel F. Runde is a senior vice president, director of the Project on Prosperity and Development, and holds the William A. Schreyer Chair in Global Analysis at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. Conor Savoy is a non-resident senior associate at the Project on Prosperity and Development at CSIS. Shannon McKeown is a program coordinator for the Project on Prosperity and Development (PPD) and Project on U.S. Leadership in Development (USLD) at CSIS.

Support for this brief was provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID.


38 Ibid.


44 Harding, “Is Coronavirus Making Southeast Asia More Authoritarian?”


