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“Previewing the 2021 Summit for Democracy”

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Paige Montfort

Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us here today for the Center for Strategic and International Studies – CSIS – press briefing “Previewing the 2021 Summit for Democracy.” This two-day virtual summit, which commences in just a few days’ time on December 9th, aims, according to the White House, to galvanize commitments and initiatives across three principal themes which we’re all probably familiar with: defending against authoritarianism, fighting corruption, and promoting respect for human rights.

So we’ve gathered three CSIS experts here this afternoon to discuss the summit and to provide some analysis on its key themes, its significance, various challenges we’re facing, implications, and more. They’ll each provide some brief opening remarks and then we’ll move into a Q&A session. We will provide instructions on that after the opening remarks conclude.

And so, without further ado, I’m going to introduce our experts.

Starting us off, we have Marti Flacks, a senior fellow and director of the Human Rights Initiative here at CSIS.

And speaking second we’ll have Dr. Mike Green. He’s senior vice president for Asia at CSIS and our Japan Chair.

And finally, third, we will have Erol Yayboke. Erol is senior fellow with the International Security Program here and director of the Project on Fragility and Mobility. He will round out our opening remarks.

And so, with that, I will turn it over to you, Marti.

Marti Flacks

Thanks, Paige. And thank you all for being here.

As Paige said, the Summit for Democracy will be held this Thursday and Friday in a virtual setting with 110 invited participants from around the world. Participating governments are expected to make remarks and to announce new commitments to support democracy and human rights, both domestically in their own countries and internationally, although we expect some of those detailed commitments may come out after the summit into the – into the new year.

In addition to head-of-state remarks, there will be a number of panels and discussions on thematic issues that will also include participation from nongovernmental actors, including civil society activists from both invited and non-invited countries, journalists, and the private sector. And I understand that at least some of the time these will be simultaneously livestreamed on two separate channels.

I think it's fair to say that the summit came together very quickly and at the last minute, and that that has led to some process challenges, including how invitations were issued and to whom. There has understandably been a big focus on who was invited and who was not invited, and that's certainly understandable in advance of the summit and when there has been very little other information being made available about it. And we're happy to answer questions on that topic. I do hope, however, that as we move into the summit week and the summit itself and the surrounding events that there will be an increased focus on the substance of the summit – what is said at the meetings, what is decided, and how this so-called Year of Action that is intended to be launched at the summit will take shape.

For me, I see the summit as an agenda-setting moment even more than an outcomes moment, although the outcomes are also important and I'll talk to those in a moment. But I really want the summit to answer the question: Is there a consensus around why democracy is struggling around the world? And what likeminded countries who understand the importance of democracy should be doing about it.

And by setting this up as a two-step process with a second summit intended to take place a year from now, I really hope that it does launch a greater focus inside the U.S. government and in other participating governments to take specific steps to both shore up our own democracies and to integrate democracy and human rights into our foreign policy agendas to promote those things in places that still face authoritarian and other struggling regimes.

So, for me, I am judging the summit, really, based on two things. One is whether a clear coherent message comes out of the summit around how this group of countries will work to promote democracy and human rights, going forward – is there a consensus around diagnosis of the problem and the steps that we need to launch over the next year to tackle it – and, two, whether the summit is effective in activating and engaging the participants and really creating buy-in from the governments in the Global North and the Global South that are there and those outside of government from civil society and the private sector.

Up until now, this has been a very U.S.-driven process and, ideally, this Year of Action would be not an exclusively U.S.-led endeavor but I would like to see this summit really create momentum that leads to spin-off work and follow-up work around the world, whether that's on a regional basis or whether that's building on some of the key themes and priorities that come out of the summit discussions.

And then, substantively, I would just say I would like to see some specific actions come out of this summit, some specific commitments that can be built on over the course of the Year of Action. I think it's important that

summit participants take strong stands around some of the biggest threats to democracy that we have already identified.

In my mind, three of those really important areas I'll just mention are, one, concrete commitments to better regulate technology and tech companies, which once, you know, promised to empower civil society but, on balance, are really, largely, empowering dictators and other malign actors, and really seeing a consensus and acknowledgement of the need to take action both to provide access to technology safely to civil societies that have used it in their work, but also to deny access to that technology by – to governments and other malign actors that want to abuse it for their own purposes.

Two is tackling the corruption that continues to make many governments more responsive to their individual self-interest and less responsive to their citizens, and here, I've been heartened, really, to see some of the announcements that have already been made or that have been previewed on two fronts.

One is the actions that make it harder for dictators and corrupt officials to find places to hide their money, so sort of deny safe haven for those financial flows overseas by putting in place, you know, stronger transparency and disclosure requirements in the banking sector, in the real estate sector, and elsewhere; and then, two, to make it harder for those actors to actually steal the money in the first place. And so here, announcements we hope to see around beneficial ownership disclosure, make it harder for government officials to set up shell companies to create, you know, government contracts with their selves and their relatives to siphon off public funds are really, really important.

And I would just add a note here that this is an area where our human rights agenda and our climate agenda really intersect. We know that the natural resources sector, particularly the oil and gas sector, is particularly susceptible to manipulation and to corruption, and we've seen that in many countries around the world. The way that industry is structured has made it relatively easy for government officials to capture those funds for private use. And so as we move away from fossil fuels to other energy technologies, I think there's an opportunity to help reduce that opportunity for corruption.

And then, lastly, in terms of thematic issues that I hope that summit focuses on, I think it's incredibly important that they hone in on the social and economic issues that are undermining democracy. That includes the role that racial injustice plays in disenfranchisement of people's civil and political rights, it includes the negative impact that economic inequality is having on democracy and the undermining of confidence that that institutions that that growing inequality is having around the world, and the role that the private sector particularly can play in addressing those

social and economic issues. So those are the three topics that I would love to see them take action on at the summit and in the year of action.

I think I'm just about at time, so I'm going to stop there and happy to answer further questions.

Michael J. Green

Well, let me pick up the baton. It's Mike Green from CSIS. And I'd like to focus briefly on the importance of the summit in overall global affairs and American foreign policy strategy, and some of the challenges that the administration is going to have implementing the year of action with some key allies in Asia, if we don't strengthen consultation and coordination of efforts going forward.

But starting first with the importance of this summit for democracies, first and foremost the fact that President Biden has made this a centerpiece of his foreign policy strategy and his politics – I mean, his very reason for running for president – is very significant. The Trump administration and President Trump in particular not only didn't attend to this issue, they sent conflicting signals – whether it was the summit and love affair with Kim Jong-un, or the support for a Saudi regime that we now see bearing fruit in widely reported deals for Jared Kushner to start a new equity fund the Saudis support.

So it comes after a period of real questions about American commitment to democracy. And I don't think those questions began with the Trump administration. There were questions about the Obama administration in some respects as well. So for dissidents, for human rights activists around the world, that matters. That matters a lot.

The second reason I think it's important right now is – and important in particular to have a global summit for democracy, is that the authoritarian states are comparing notes. They're learning from each other. They are repressing legitimate human rights movements, civil society organizations, and they're teaching each other how to do it. I first saw this in my own experience 15 years ago when I was in the White House on the NSC staff. And we got a copy from friends of a document that China and Russia distributed at a multilateral summit called the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, made up of China, Russia, and Central Asian states.

And the document was entitled, "How to Counter Color Revolutions." And it gave a checklist of how you use technology, surveillance techniques, anti-civil society and NGO laws. And we see even more of that learning and mutual learning by the autocracies, and civil society groups, human rights activists are all noticing it. So the fact that autocrats are sharing technology and learning from each other to defeat open societies is itself a very good reason why there needs to be a global summit of democracies on how we reinforce our norms and reinforce rights around the world.

And the third reason I think it's important is because this is not unrelated to the challenges we face in other spheres. For example, there's great concern in the United States, in Japan, in India, and Europe about China's Belt and Road Initiative, BRI, and the quasi-monopolistic behavior and effort to create debt traps, political influence, monopolistic control over digital infrastructure. We are throwing money at the problem. The U.S. has increased funding for what's now called the Development Finance Corporation. Japan and Europe – Japan in particular – are throwing a lot of money at the problem.

But if you are going to a country offering infrastructure financing in critical areas such as ports or digital infrastructure, if the recipient state is corrupt, bribable, not accountable to its people, it's an unfair playing field. And it will continue to be easy for China to sell deals that end up in debt traps and, as we saw in Sri Lanka and in Laos for example, increase geopolitical influence with China. So leveling the playing field is an important geopolitical goal.

And finally, there's the question of whether it's at all legitimate to be having a Summit for Democracy right now given the challenges in the United States, given backsliding in democracy. The Chinese and Russian ambassadors to the United States published a joint op-ed asking how dare the United States host this Summit for Democracies, and then – and this was truly Orwellian – arguing that the U.S. shouldn't dictate this; these are issues that should be decided by the people in these countries. Well, if you want to have an election and a free and fair election in China and Russia, then that would be great.

I think it is unfortunate but more importantly analytically illogical to argue that this is not a legitimate time for the United States and other democracies to be convening on this because somehow our brand is so tarnished or democracy is backsliding. That's precisely why we need to do it. And in fact, surveys particularly in Asia show that there is more support than ever before for democratic norms, less support than ever before for autocracy, so the willingness is there.

And in particular, you have democracies that are doing more in this space than they used to. Japan and the Republic of Korea, for example, are spending considerably more of their development funding on governance and democracy than ever before. In surveys we did at CSIS of strategic thinkers around the world, it was the Japanese and the Koreans were most willing to impose sanctions or otherwise pressure China on Hong Kong and Xinjiang, for example.

So it's completely legitimate and appropriate to be hosting this summit because there is support for democratic norms and a recognition that the backsliding is precisely why we need to do this.

The one area where I have some concern about progress is that this Summit for Democracy and the overall approach has not been well-integrated in the Biden administration's overall grand strategy. The other two key elements in the Biden grand strategy are climate change, which I'll set aside for a moment, and strategic competition with China. And those who are in charge of strategic competition with China in the administration make the point, rightly, that to compete we need more allies and we need more partners around the world, but especially in the Indo-Pacific. And so they have signature initiatives like AUKUS, the Australia-U.K.-U.S. security agreement; the Quad with the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India. And it's in that context where there's a disconnect within the administration that – and with some allies that has to be fixed.

The Summit for Democracies will include the Philippines, but not Thailand, another U.S. treaty ally. It won't include Singapore, a major security partner of the United States. Our allies in the region aren't saying this out loud, but countries like Japan and Australia would have much preferred that Thailand and Singapore also be included. The logic for excluding them is that the Philippines in relative terms have more free and fair elections. But when you look at things like extrajudicial killings, the Philippines actually have a worse story than either Thailand or Singapore. So this has created some disconnects within the administration and with allies and partners.

And I think for the Year of Action it will be important to make this a year of consultations. I think the summit will highlight and agree on some action along the areas that Marti just emphasized, but we need this to be something that is continuously implemented – particularly in the most contested region, the Indo-Pacific – in the year ahead. Right now, you do not hear our diplomats or officials who work in those regions and on those regions talking about this summit or about this agenda. And part of the problem is that so many of our ambassadors are being held up in the Senate, and so you need those people on the ground and in Washington implementing.

But for someone like me who works almost entirely on Asia, you don't hear about this agenda and you don't hear about this summit in our bilateral dialogues in the region, and I think the administration's going to want to use the summit to think of ways with allies who do come – like Australia and Japan, like India – to think about how we integrate it more in our strategy in Asia and how we find ways to reach out to countries that didn't get invited to make them part of the conversation. It's complicated. There are a lot of tensions. But that's something that will have to happen lest this very, very important and very necessary and timely summit agenda get to gel in the year ahead.

Thank you and over to Erol.

Erol Yayboke

Thanks, Mike. This is Erol Yayboke. I realize I'm standing in between questions, and so I will be brief.

One broad important point that I thought I would make, and then two more specific points. The broad point is that I think it's significant that this is the Summit for Democracy. It's not the summit of democracies. It's not the summit for democracies. And so, in that way, I think some of the exclusion-versus-inclusion questions can be answered, or at least you get a little bit behind some of the thinking. This is about the principles and the norms that underpin democracy. And I think, both in the summit and in the year of action that will follow, that's one of the big things that I'll be watching.

And so more specifically is two points. One is – the first one is how the U.S. and like-minded democracies can, via this summit and the year of action, counter growing influence of authoritarian leaders outside of their countries. So Marti talked about the influence of digital technologies, and this is just a slight expansion on her point there.

Authoritarians, as we know, are not only using digital tools on their own populations, not just to control the people of Xinjiang, but they're increasingly using these tools abroad for disruptive purposes. And they're also exporting the underlying technologies and strategies to like-minded authoritarian leaders.

This manifests in certainly disinformation campaigns in our country and others, but also in the exportation of surveillance technology, both hardware and software. You know, law enforcement can have overt access to surveillance technologies, but also back door via the provision of 5G. And this is where you get a lot of this apprehension in Canada and the U.S. and Europe about Huawei technology, 5G technology, that Mike mentioned.

A more subtle longer-term manifestation of this point is data localization or, put another way, internet fragmentation. The control and the fragmentation of various parts of the internet is a phenomenon that is increasing, not just in places like China. The internet in lots of places is starting to look more and more like it does in China with the great firewall. And so that should be concerning. I'll be watching whether or not that comes on – comes up in the Summit for Democracy, particularly in the Defending against Authoritarianism track.

But I think that Defending against Authoritarianism track needs to be not just how are we implementing tools like sanctions against authoritarian regimes, but how are we going past that, pushing for an internet that people can trust, but also one that maintains its openness so that authoritarians can't control it. And, you know, are there going to be efforts, again in this year of action, that move us to be able to address those slow-onset malign actions, fragmentation of the internet, et cetera?

We talked about – Marti and Mike talked about the commitments or the actions that are going to be taken. I will be watching whether or not, in this space, those include offering affirmative alternatives to Chinese 5G or Russian surveillance-technology exports. We can't just say don't use them. We've got to actually facilitate, with our partners and allies in the multilateral system, affirmative alternatives.

The second and last point I'll make is on the importance of democratic principles and norms in places experiencing conflict and fragility. And so this is getting some attention within the Biden administration. I would argue, as Mike did, that perhaps not enough.

Tony Blinken, Secretary Blinken, has said that strong democracies are more stable, more open, better partners to us, more committed to human rights, and less prone to conflict. And so I think in that there is a connection that is being made at the highest levels of the Biden-Harris administration of this democracy and violent-conflict space. So that's good, but I'll be looking forward whether or not that translates into more focus and more action.

But more importantly, this principles-and-norms point is that these authoritarian governments are defined by suppression, exclusion, and a lack of accountability. And those traits are also evident in places that are experiencing fragility and conflict. Democracy is a solution and democratic principles and norms are a solution to those challenges. Notice that I'm not saying elections. Elections are not necessarily the tool of choice here. Democracy is about transparency, accountability, and inclusive institutions. One of those institutions is elections, and I do think that that's important. But I will be watching – and I anticipate, actually, that the Summit for Democracy and the Year of Action will be more about those underlying principles and norms rather than simply figuring out how to rush to elections in as many places as we can. Ultimately that's, in my opinion, how you defend against authoritarianism, fight corruption, and ultimately promote respect for human rights, which, as Marti mentioned, are the three pillars of the summit.

Paige, back to you.

Ms. Montfort

Thank you, Erol and Mike and Marti.

And now for those of you who have attended today, we're going to open up the call to your questions, so our moderator is going to provide those instructions for you to queue in order to have your questions answered. Thank you.

Operator

(Gives queuing instructions.)

We will first go to the line of Anton La Guardia with The Economist. Go ahead, please.

Question Thank you very much for doing this. I have a question about how this summit has an impact on the internal dynamics of democracies. So first of all, does President Biden have an eye on the internal situation in the United States? How does this affect the dynamic?

Are you able to hear me?

Dr. Green Yes. Yes, Anton.

Ms. Flacks Yes.

Question Yeah, sorry, the music suddenly went on. Apologies. And secondly, how, you know, in the desire to have an inclusive process does that make it more difficult for people to ask questions about backsliding within democracies. I'm thinking about, you know, Poland, say, and so on. How does the summit grapple with the problems in the countries of participants?

Ms. Flacks I can kick off, if you want, Paige.

Thanks for that question. I'll say a couple things, and of course, my colleagues should jump in. But I think it was very helpful that early on in the summit process the Biden administration made quite clear that this summit is about both internal dynamics in democratic countries as well as the stuff that democratic countries can take to support other countries, both democracies and authoritarian regimes where citizens are pushing for democracy. The Biden administration was also very explicit in going out to invited countries and asking them to make commitments that are both internal-facing and external-facing, and it would be very interesting to see on Thursday and Friday and in the coming weeks how seriously countries took that request.

They also encouraged countries to do their own local consultation with civil society in their countries in order to develop their commitments, as a nod to the need for an inclusive conversation and a democratic conversation about what is needed inside these countries. We know that the United States is not the only established democracy that is struggling with backsliding on a number of issues, and so it's important that not just we but European countries and others send that signal that they're looking introspectively as well as externally. I think there's a – otherwise, there's a very real danger coming out of this summit that you have a very lopsided conversation where it's about asking countries in the global south to think about how to improve their democracies and reinforce their democracies and countries in the global north how to help those other countries. And that's exactly the opposite of the kind of dynamic that needs to come out of a summit like this, particularly in a moment that we're in in the United States and in established democracies in terms of backsliding.

So I think the Biden administration is conceptually approaching it from the right lens in terms of looking inward and outward and being humble about the challenges that we're facing. I think in practice, translating that into concrete commitments and actions that resonate domestically is very challenging. I think it is not a surprise to say that it is difficult for the domestic policy informed policy parts of the United States government to work together in a summit like this on issues like this. It's also, I think, been difficult for them to tap the civil society and activist communities, both that work on foreign policy and domestic policy.

And that was one of – one of the issues flagged by civil society very early on, because much of the outreach has been led by the State Department. There is obviously a lot more thinking about civil society groups that work on foreign policy issues or that work overseas, and there had to be, I think, a very significant and fairly last minute effort to tap into domestically focused civil society, you know, civil rights organizations and others here in the United States, and to bring in, on the U.S. government side, the domestic policy council and domestic-facing U.S. government agencies to do that.

And I think that did happen, but I think it came quite late and probably insufficiently to – for the purposes of this week. I think it will be much – equally important for that process, though, to continue and expand over the next year, over this year of action, so that we are sending the signal that we are both working on our own democracy and working on helping other democracies around the world. I'll stop there and see if someone else wants to jump in.

Dr. Green

Well, it's Mike. I agree with Marti. I think she's right. But here's why it's going to be pretty complicated. Joe Biden, to his credit, has wanted to maintain as much as possible a bipartisan approach to foreign policy, and especially strategic competition with China. And although there's a lot of, you know, volleys fired back and forth, Biden seems – he enjoyed pretty robust support on the Hill for his policy on China.

But if the domestic agenda in the U.S. gets pumped up because of this democracy summit – so, for example, if the White House says, you know, precisely because of this summit for democracy we must pass the Voting Rights Act, whether you support it or not, it's going to immediately become a partisan issue within the U.S. Congress and within the U.S. political system and put at risk the bipartisan support that right now the president enjoys on this agenda, because he's got people like Dan Sullivan and Marco Rubio and many others on the Republican side who are strong, you know, advocates of this agenda.

So it's tricky – it's tricky translating this into action on the U.S. side because it quickly becomes partisan, which is not what I think President Biden wants in his overall foreign policy. So it'll take some – it'll take some real finesse. And, frankly, a lot of pretty difficult discussions within the

administration about how much they want to preference on agenda over the other.

Operator And for our next question we will go to Rita Cheng with Radio Free Asia. Go ahead, please.

Question Hi. Thank you. Thank you for doing this. My question is about U.S.-China competition on democracy, and for three of our experts.

China now is not hesitating to claim itself as a democratic country, and then smear U.S. and Western democracy as falling models. So I'm curious, from your point of view what are China's motivation of being a more aggressive actor on that? And are we going to see a new Cold War after the summit? Thank you.

Mr. Yayboke Well, I'll start. I don't think we're going to see a cold war because of this summit. I don't think that the administration should be pulling punches or worried about that. And people debate whether we're in a cold war or not. And, you know, it's certainly not the old cold war. We never traded more than 1 percent of our overall international trade with the Soviets, but most years 15-16 percent of our trade is with China. So, you know, the analogy is flawed. But there is no doubt that there's a much stronger ideological component to U.S.-China strategic competition.

And while the Chinese will blame the U.S. for this and claim that we have a cold war mentality, the reality is it's Beijing that first introduced an NGO law designed to essentially squash internal social civil society mobilization of any kind. It's Beijing that introduced restrictions on academic freedom that have forced storied programs like Harvard and Princeton's language instruction in China or the Carnegie-Tsinghua Law Center to move out of China to places like Taipei and Singapore. It's Beijing that's been exporting surveillance technology to the Tatmadaw, to the military in Myanmar, and elsewhere.

So in the three categories that Marti and Erol talked about for this summit, foreign interference technology, in particular, it's game on. I mean, Beijing is, clearly, trying to undermine democratic governance and open societies for strategic gains. It's not that this is the Comintern and China's trying to communize the world.

That's a straw man argument. But there's no doubt that in the larger competition we're finding ourselves in with China Beijing has identified democratic norms as an advantage to the U.S. and is attacking them at home and abroad everywhere it can.

So very, very important topic for the summit. However, it would be a mistake for the administration – and I think they've been careful about this – but it would be a mistake for them to posit this Summit for Democracy on

the idea that China or Russia are responsible for the backsliding in democracy. That's mostly internal.

Beijing and, to a large extent, Moscow are exploiting it but the problems are more internal and it's – as far as we can see so far, that seems to be the context and the approach that the administration and the premise that the administration is taking.

But no doubt about it, there's a – Rita, there's a heavy illogical component and I think it began in Beijing.

Ms. Flacks

I'll just very quickly add a couple of sentences. I agree entirely with Mike's last point so I won't repeat it, because he's absolutely right about the sort of internal backsliding challenges.

I would just add that we held an event this morning, a public event this morning, with activists from countries that were not invited and, particularly, closed spaces, particularly, nondemocratic regimes. We also held a private event with a larger group of them beforehand. And one theme that we heard over and over again from those activists is how important it is to them to see the U.S. as an example of democracy, how closely they follow our successes and our challenges in democracy and how much they hold us up as an example, and how important it is for us to continue to talk about our own democracy. And you don't hear CSOs talk that way about China. In fact, quite the opposite. You know, what you hear is the concerns, as Mike and others have referenced, about – and Erol had referenced about the actions that China is taking – (audio break) – for technology that undermines democracy or threatens human rights or, more directly, is taking to undermine democracy around the world.

So, you know, I think it is incredibly important and I say this to our colleagues in the U.S. government all the time that as much as we acknowledge – as important as it is that we acknowledge the challenges that we face in democracy in the United States, we can't use that as an excuse to back away from sharing our example and sharing our experience with those countries that are still struggling with democracy and with activists that are working towards this in their own countries. They're expecting it from us, and I think this is – the summit is a real opportunity to reinforce our commitment and help them – help deliver that to them.

Operator

(Gives queuing instructions.)

Ms. Montfort

Thank you, Alan (operator), and I'm going to join in here with a question from George Condon at the National Journal.

He's interested in whether there are long-term consequences with the countries that were not invited to this summit, and I'll turn it over to Mike, Marti, Erol, whoever would like to speak on this one.

Dr. Green

Well, I'll open if it's OK, guys. It's Mike.

I think one – well, if I were king of the democracy – of the Summit for Democracy – I know, that's ironic – I would have held a summit of leading democracies that are prepared to be change agents to lead, particularly, in their regions. I wouldn't have done a hundred and some countries, but I would have had regional representation and then I would have asked Indonesia, Korea, others, to take the summit agenda to their regions and be more inclusive than the U.S. is in this week's summit.

And so, for example, in Asia, Japan or Korea or Indonesia, had they been in charge of the agenda – and they weren't – would have included Singapore and would have included Thailand, and would have even included, I think, Vietnam. And the reason is that they are far less democratic than the countries that were invited, but they're not all fighting the premise. The prime minister of Vietnam in Tokyo last week gave a speech saying that in order to attract more investment at a time when China's cracking down, Vietnam's prepared to make political reforms.

So I would look for ways to be inclusive to encourage these three agenda items in cooperation, even with, you know, quite undemocratic countries like Vietnam. Not inviting them to the main summit but looking for ways for our allies and partners who care about this issue to reach out and encourage progress for the – in the less-democratic states, because that is a big question. If this is going to be an issue that unites countries around democratic norms, you know, we want it to be an agenda or a series of agenda items that a variety of countries – even deeply, deeply flawed democracies or non-democracies – might sign onto. That would represent progress.

That, I know, is what a lot of our allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific would have preferred because they worry that China's going to pick off those countries and argue, well, you're clearly not on the American side. And although they won't join China – they don't like the Chinese government – it does complicate our diplomacy and our allies' diplomacy.

So concentric circles to try to find a sort of – you know, maybe not the varsity league, but another way to reach out in – maybe with allies and partners to try to get for parts of the agenda countries to sign on so we broaden the actual pace of change on these issues across different regions, that's what I would do. But I'm not king of the democracy summit – the Summit for Democracy, and they – and they went for the – sort of the approach they did, which is one way to do it. But the downside is now they have to think about outreach in phase two.

Mr. Yayboke

This is Erol. Mike, it seems like we may need to get you some new business cards.

But I think the only thing I would add to what Mike said is, you know, this summit was called for in the now-famous Foreign Affairs article that then-candidate Biden published. And I think that was in part motivated by his and others' apprehension about democratic backsliding and the idea that the U.S. is not going to fix everything, everywhere for everyone but we do have the ability to convene, we do have the ability to put things on the agenda, and democracy was one of those things that he as a candidate and now as president want to put on the agenda.

So I think that their hope is – and look, this was never going to make everyone everywhere happy. I think the points that Mike and Marti have made about the exclusion and the countries that have been excluded, look, there's going to be fallout that they have to deal with. There was fallout that they had to deal with France after the AUKUS announcement. And I think in one way it's useful for the Biden-Harris administration to now know who really cares about this, and you know, I anticipate that the countries that Marti hosted this morning at CSIS from – you know, that were perhaps not included, I would imagine that in the Year of Action there's nothing saying that those countries and activists and civil society from within those countries can('t) be included going forward.

And so if their goal was to spur a global conversation on democracy that then hopefully spurs action at the regional level like Mike said, then I think that they're well on their way to having achieved that goal. I think most people who are watching the Summit for Democracy are, of course, saying that this is the beginning, not the end. This is not a one-off. It remains to be seen how much can be accomplished in that Year of Action.

Paige, back to you.

Ms. Montfort

Thank you so much, Mike and Erol.

And as we're approaching our anticipated end time here, we may go just a few moments over if you're all able to stay on. If not, we will, of course, have a transcript afterwards.

But I did want to ask one final question about the kind of role of the private sector in the summit – what role they might play, what we should expect of business in terms of democracy. And I think Marti will probably take a stab at that one. But I also want to kind of give Erol and Mike a chance to wrap up as well. I know you've been working on some different reports, policy briefs, things that are past and also upcoming.

And so at this time we'll kind of answer that question about business and the private sector and then go into any closing remarks that you all would like to give.

Ms. Flacks

Thanks, Paige.

I'm happy to take this one, because I think that the role of the private sector in either reinforcing or undermining democracy is incredibly underappreciated. And I think it's so critical that companies and investors be at the table in these discussions. Companies have an enormous impact on democracy in a positive way when they help stand up for free and fair and peaceful elections. We saw that happen in the United States during the course of this past election or when they work to defend human-rights activists who are under threat in the countries where these companies are working.

We've seen companies start to adopt strong policies on protecting human-rights defenders. They have increasingly begun to understand that attacks on activists and media are like canaries in a coal mine for the eventual business environment that they will operate in. And if they say nothing and do nothing about that backsliding, eventually those countries will become inhospitable to business as well as civil society. And so we see companies taking positive actions in many regards to support democracy and human rights.

At the same time, I think what's not often enough acknowledged is the impact that companies have on democracy through their own day-to-day business practices, either supporting inclusive economic growth or contributing to worsening inequality.

And so to me two of the most important things companies can do to support democracy are to treat their workers fairly, including paying them a living wage, their direct employees as well as employees all the way down their complicated and globalized supply chains, and supporting worker organizing.

We know that economic inequality is helping to undermine democracy, that people, not just in the United States but in other countries, when they lose faith in their institutions because they don't see the benefit of democracy to them, it weakens those institutions and it weakens democracy. And worsening economic inequality, that results from starvation wages and poor worker health and safety practices as contributing to that.

And so companies can take action. They should take action to change that and treat their workers fairly. And at the same time, we've seen all over the world, you know, historically in Europe and more recently in South Africa and Sudan, even as we speak, the role that unions play in democracy. Unions are a training ground for activists to organize, to learn how to engage with institutions. And unions understand the importance of elevating the voice of the average citizen. And so an agenda that helps reinforce the right to organize, I think, is an incredibly important piece of the summit.

I think the Biden administration has taken a very strong stance on that issue domestically. And this is an area where I think the administration is actually further ahead domestically than they are in their foreign policy. But I do hope and expect to see some announcements this week around these issues on the foreign-policy front as well.

So I'm looking forward to seeing what comes out of the business event that will be held this week, where I hope we will see businesses not just make clear what they want to see from government but will actually commit themselves to their own call for action, to say this is what business can do for democracy. I'll stop there.

Dr. Green

I would point anyone who's interested in this to a joint task force that CSIS, Freedom House and the McCain Institute organized. We put out a quite detailed set of recommendations for advancing democracy, not just this summit but more broadly.

I chaired or co-chaired the task-force group on this question, on trade, finance, and the private sector. And there's robust support in the Chamber of Commerce, in the Business Roundtable and elsewhere, for doing more on the democracy front. We've also shown that in surveys we've done at CSIS on China, our CSIS China Survey, where over half of the Chamber of Commerce respondents said we should be doing more to pressure China on things like Hong Kong and Xinjiang, interestingly.

So, you know, you can read the report, but we talked about things like incorporating gender chapters in free trade agreements, because women's empowerment is important to this agenda. We talked about incorporating anti-kleptocracy rules in multinational development bank practices, and things along those lines. There's a lot the private sector could be doing. And I think in the year of action, which as I said should really be a year of further consultation, it would be very useful for the administration to reach out more than they had to the Chamber and the Business Roundtable and others to begin getting business on side, because they bring a lot – they have somethings they have the answer to or for, but they bring a lot of capability to the table if we want to advance democratic norms.

Mr. Yayboke

Paige, maybe I can just say one last broad point. I know we're out of time. One thing that I will be watching, in addition to everything else that was said, is back to one of the things that Mike said in his opening remarks about it, the connection of this Summit for Democracy and the agenda and the year of action, and I agree with Mike, hopefully consultation. The connection of that agenda to the other important Biden-Harris administration agendas – climate change, you know, racial inequity, and things like that. And those are questions that I'll be asking to my friends in the administration, even to friends on Capitol Hill, because for too long I

think we've thought about this democracy promotion and democracy and governance agenda in a siloed vacuum.

And in my space, when you think about violent and conflict – violence and conflict prevention, usually that's one part of the U.S. government. And then there's another part that deals with democracy and governance. And I think that the reality on the ground is showing that we can't be thinking of those things as separately. We need to be thinking of them in a much more coordinated way. So as the next year-plus goes on, you know, and the next Afghanistan happens, or whatever global crisis emerges, questions should be asked of this administration about how this connects to that democracy agenda.

Back over to you, Paige.

Ms. Montfort

Thank you, Erol.

And so we have gone a few minutes over. Thank you, everyone, for staying with us. And thank you again, Mike and Marti, for your time and for sharing your expertise today, all three of you. Thank you as well to those of you who called in to listen, to ask questions. For those of you who may not have had your questions answered please don't hesitate to reach out to me, Paige Montfort, CSIS's media relations coordinator. I'm always happy to set up an interview with any one of our great experts, including the three who spoke here today. As I mentioned, we'll have transcript out shortly, within just a few hours at most. I'm going to send that out, and I'll be linking it to the briefing page at CSIS.org, where you can also find links to all of the great work and events that have been referenced throughout this call, and more great content in the near future. So thanks, again, for joining, everyone, and have a great week.

(END)