

Asia and Latin America: Democratic Bonds in Times of Authoritarian Advances

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Summary

This paper aims to explore the connections between the democracies of Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean in a world marked by uncertainty and structural changes. It poses several questions: which countries constitute *democratic Asia*? What traits do they share with Latin America and the Caribbean? What recurring patterns and anomalies characterize their emergence and development? What is the current state of the connections between these two regions? The document identifies factors and mechanisms in which there is potential for progress.

Introduction

The world is witnessing a significant phenomenon: the shift of the international system's axis from West to East. After enduring years of colonial rule and being relegated to a proxy space for conflicts between Western powers, Asia has emerged as a pivotal actor and a central stage within the global system. Alongside its meteoric rise in the global economy, there has been a simultaneous growth in its political and cultural influence. In this sense, the future of democracy in Asia will be decisive for the future of democracy worldwide in the 21st century.

For Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), this emerges as a first-order concern. The region shares with Asia a historical narrative of peripheral status in the global order and a fluctuating dynam-

ic of political change oscillating between authoritarianism and democracy. The advent of the third wave of democratization marked a new political era, witnessing the establishment of new democracies in both regions. Since then, the defense and fortification of these democracies have become simultaneously a challenge and an opportunity to strengthen essential bonds of cooperation.

However, democratic bonds elicit little interest in discussions about Asia-LAC relations. China's predominant influence role monopolizes the agenda, prioritizing the opportunities presented by a closer alliance with the Asian giant and the risks associated with its rivalry with the United States. This has downplayed democracy as a central concern of the international agendas of both regions, even though it continues to be a central issue in national debates.

Likewise, the importance of this issue is reinforced in a global context also marked by the erosion of democracy recorded in the reports of Freedom House, V-Dem, the Economist Intelligence Unit and other related organizations and projects. The number of people affected, the depth of the changes and the leading role of powers such as China and Russia, once again make Asia a central actor and stage.

This paper aims to explore the connections between the democracies of Asia and Latin America in a world marked by uncertainty and structural changes. It poses several questions: which countries constitute *democratic Asia*? What traits do they share with Latin America? What recurring patterns and anomalies characterize their emergence and development? What is the state of the links between the two regions?

To address these issues, the first section places the cases on the map and records general coincidences and divergences. The second analyzes Asian cases in detail, taking into account their history, their attributes and deficits. The third describes and evaluates the relations between the two regions in their geopolitical, political and economic dimensions. It seeks to identify the factors and mechanisms in which there is the possibility of progress, to conclude with strategies that are proposed as recommendations for a multilateral work agenda.

The democracies of Asia and LAC

Any discussion regarding the democracies of Asia and LAC demands, first and foremost, an explicit delineation of which countries fall under this category. This is a complex task, involving both methodological decisions by analysts and the inherent characteristics and dynamics of change within the observed entities. The choice of indicators and databases, such as those provided by Freedom House, V-Dem, Economist Intelligence Unit, and other widely used indices or typologies in specialized literature, impacts the outcomes of the analyses.

China's predominant influence role monopolizes the agenda, prioritizing the opportunities presented by a closer alliance with the Asian giant and the risks associated with its rivalry with the United States.

Despite variations, a broad review of these indices reveals a contrasting picture: while the Americas are predominantly democratic, the Asian continent is characterized by a prevalence of authoritarianism. Currently, among the 33 sovereign states in LAC, only six cases concentrated around the Caribbean can be categorized as authoritarian: Cuba, Haiti, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Venezuela. The rest span a wide spectrum, ranging from highly consolidated democracies to countries barely meeting minimum democratic standards. The South American cases include Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, and Uruguay; the Central American cases are Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama; and the Caribbean cases comprise Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Dominican Republic, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago.

By contrast, among the 49 Asian states, fewer than twenty can be considered part of democratic Asia. Most are concentrated in the Indo-Pacific subregions: India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka in South Asia; South Korea, Japan, Mongolia, and Taiwan in East Asia; and the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and East Timor in Southeast Asia.

Figure 1. LAC Democracies and Autocracies, 2023



Note: Puerto Rico and the Overseas Territories in LAC belonging to the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands are excluded.

Source: Self-generated using data from Freedom House, V-Dem, and the Economist Intelligence Unit.

Figure 2. Democracies and autocracies of South Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia, 2023



Source: Self-generated with data from Freedom House, V-Dem and Economist Intelligence Unit.

The contrast is also evident in geographical terms, as over 90% of the total population in LAC lives in democracies spread across an extensive area of more than 19 million square kilometers. In contrast, democracies in Asia cover less than half of the continent's total population and are concentrated in an area of less than nine million square kilometers. The population weight of over two billion inhabitants in Asia is almost four times higher than that of democracies in LAC, which do not reach 590 million. Furthermore, the contrasts are more pronounced among the subregions of Asia, given that the population living under authoritarian governments in Eurasia and the Middle East exceeds 80% and 90% respectively (Freedom House, 2023).

Another noteworthy dimension is the positioning of several Asian democracies as indispensable links in global value chains. According to data from the World Bank, while the combined GDP of the 27 democracies in LAC amounted to \$4.9 trillion in 2021, democratic Asia exceeded \$13.6 trillion. Three of the four *tigers* (South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan), Japan, and the newly industrialized economies in the Southeast (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand) embodied the *Asian miracle* of sustained high growth rates throughout the second half of the last century. This led to Asian democracies such as Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore to achieve some of the highest levels of income and human development in the world.

Geographical and socio-economic indicators of Asian democracies, 2021

Country	Total area (km ²)	Population	GDP (USD, billions, at current prices)	GNI per capita (USD at current prices)	Human
South Korea	100,410	51.744.856	1.8 trillion	35-110	0.925
Philippines	300,000	113,880,328	394,086	3,550	0.699
India	3,287,260	1.4 trillion	3.1 trillion	2,150	0.633
Indonesia	1,916,907	273,753,191	1.1 billion	4,180	0.705
Japan	377,974	125,681,593	4.9 trillion	42,650	0.925
Malaysia	330,241	33,573,874	372,980	10,710	0.803
Mongolia	1,564,116	3,347,782	15,285	3-730	0.739
Nepal	147,180	30,034,989	36,288	1,220	0.602
Singapore	728	5,453,566	396,986	64,010	0.939
Sri Lanka	65,610	22,156,000	88,927	4,030	0.782
Thailand	513,120	71,601,103	505,947	7,090	0.800
Taiwan	36,197	23,859,912	775,838	33,756	0.926
East Timor	14,870	1,320,942	3,621	1,140	0.607

Note. The World Bank classifies economies into four income groups according to their GNI per capita: high (>12,535), medium-high (4,046-12,535), medium-low (1,036-4,045), and low (<1,036). UNDP categorizes countries on whether they have a very high (≥0.800), high (0.700-0.799), medium (0.550-0.699) or low (<0.550) HDI.

Source: Self-generated with World Bank and UNDP data. Taiwan data obtained from its Office of National Statistics.

These socio-economic milestones, which Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia have also to some degree attained, coexist alongside more heterogeneous realities. This is evident in the prevalence of lower-middle-income economies in South Asia (India, Sri Lanka, Nepal), Mongolia, the Philippines and East Timor. Similar variations are observed in the predominance of HDI levels around the median. However, these disparities only reaffirm what specialized literature verified during the third wave of democratization: **high economic development is not an exclusive precondition of democracy.**

A balance of democracy in Asia

Assessing democracy in Asia implies taking into account the immense political diversity within this region. Depending on the cases, democratization occurred in two distinct historical periods. *Ancient democracies* (Japan, India and Sri Lanka) were established in the early post-war years and have persisted, with varying degrees of stability, to the present day. In contrast, *new democracies* emerged during the third wave of democratization, spanning from the mid-80's to the late 20th

century, following authoritarian cycles that interrupted previous democratic experiences.

Although some institutions of democratic governance, such as elective principles for appointing authorities, predate World War II (for instance, the British colonial administration in Sri Lanka established universal suffrage in 1931), independence was a precondition for democratization.¹ While the bulk of LAC achieved independence in the first half of 19th century (with exceptions like Cuba and the British and Dutch dominions in the Caribbean and South America), the majority of democratic Asian countries gained independence between 1945 and 1965 (excluding Thailand, which was never colonized, and East Timor, remaining under Indonesian control until 1999 after Portugal's withdrawal in 1975).

Following independence, the construction of the political regime was shaped by two processes that marked the second half of the century in the region: the formation of nation-states and the ideological disputes of the Cold War. Concerning the former, the political entities resulting from decolonization maintained colonial boundaries, often grouping segmented populations in terms of language, ethnicity, and religion. The lack of social cohesion and the absence of a unifying national identity amidst this heterogeneity became a source of instability for these weakly consolidated states. This led to violent conflicts between central governments that imposed a vision of the nation and groups that rejected or were excluded by it (Croissant and Lorenz, 2018).

Secondly, this conflict line intersected with revolutionary and counter-revolutionary struggles of the Cold War era. This combination made the second half of the century years of extreme violence through armed conflicts and systematic state repression (Bellamy, 2013). This includes the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in Maoist China; the occupation of Tibet; the Korean and Vietnam Wars; the White Terror under Tai-

wan's Kuomintang; the rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia; anti-communist campaigns in Indonesia and the Philippines; the fight against Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka; the occupation of East Timor by Indonesian forces; confrontations between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armies in Myanmar; and the civil war in Nepal.

In most cases, pacification would arrive with the end of the Cold War as the confrontation between great powers diminished, and economic growth solidified internal order. Thus, alongside the economic miracle, another *Asian miracle* of pacification emerged (Bellamy, 2013), ushering in a new era that would bring unprecedented political changes. The third wave of democratization exerted its force in the region between 1986 and 1999, with democratic transitions in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand.

These countries underwent extensive transformations of their political systems, changing their Constitutions, legislatures, political parties and other key democratic institutions. To a lesser extent, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore experienced an increased openness in their political systems, while Myanmar witnessed the birth of an unprecedented pro-democracy movement. Thus, the Asian continent entered the new millennium with a very different political landscape than that which prevailed in the previous century.

Diversity within Democratic Asia

The trajectory followed by the countries that make up democratic Asia has not been uniform. While some transitions like those in Taiwan and South Korea culminated in consolidated regimes, others were derailed along the way, resulting in flawed democracies. The democratic quality is compromised by the persistence of political practices and electoral regulations that leave countries on the verge of being considered non-democratic.

¹ A description of the 20th century elections in Asia Pacific is found in Nohlen et al. (2001a and 2001b).

Characterization of the political regimes of democratic Asia according to Freedom House, V-Dem and EIU, 2022

Country	Freedom House (Freedom in the World)	V-Dem (Regimes of the World)	EIU (Democracy Index)
South Korea	Free	Liberal Democracy	Full democracy
Philippines	Partially Free	Electoral autocracy	Defective democracy
India	Partially Free	Electoral autocracy	Defective democracy
Indonesia	Partially Free	Electoral democracy	Defective democracy
Japan	Free	Liberal Democracy	Full democracy
Malaysia	Partially Free	Electoral autocracy	Defective democracy
Mongolia	Free	Electoral democracy	Defective democracy
Nepal	Partially Free	Electoral democracy	Hybrid regime
Singapore	Partially Free	Electoral autocracy	Defective democracy
Sri Lanka	Partially Free	Electoral democracy	Defective democracy
Thailand	non-free	Closed autocracy	Defective democracy
Taiwán	Free	Liberal Democracy	Full democracy
East Timor	Free	Electoral democracy	Defective democracy

Note: Freedom in the World does not measure stricto sensu the state of democracy in the world, but evaluates the rights and freedoms of individuals. However, both components are fundamental prerequisites for democracy. It assigns each country a score of 0 to 4 points across 25 indicators for a total score of 100 points. These indicators are grouped into two categories: political rights (0-40) and civil liberties (0-60). Based on the achieved score, countries are categorized as free, partly free, or not free.

Regimes of the World distinguishes four regimes: closed autocracies, electoral autocracies, electoral democracies, and liberal democracies. This typology is operationalized with V-Dem data, as detailed by Lührmann et al. (2018).

The Democracy Index is based on the scores from 60 indicators grouped into five categories with scores from 0 to 10: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, government functioning, political participation, and political culture. The index value is the average of these five categories, categorizing countries into one of four political regimen categories: full democracy (>8), flawed democracy (>6 and ≤8), hybrid regime (>4 and ≤6), and authoritarian regime (≤4).

Source: Self-generated using 2023 data from Freedom House, V-Dem and Economist Intelligence Unit.

The general trends of this variation in the quality of the regimens become evident when comparing the indices commonly cited in the specialized literature. Based on these records, it is clear that the full democracies of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan stand as the democratic beacons of Asia. Both political and civil rights are respected; elec-

tions are free, fair, and competitive; and systems of checks and balances operate effectively.

Japan's current parliamentary system was established during the American occupation, dismantling the powers of the pre-war nobility and military bureaucracy. Under the new Constitution, old

and new political parties solidified into the 1955 System, which established the Liberal Democratic Party as the predominant force, governing almost uninterruptedly since then (Haddad, 2018).

On the other hand, South Korea and Taiwan are among the few democracies worldwide that emerged from the third wave and managed to consolidate. Following the independence of the southern part of the Korean peninsula in 1948, cycles of democracy and authoritarianism resulted in six distinct republics amid military coups, elections with massive fraud and periods under martial law. The legalization of political parties and massive protests precipitated the crisis of Chun Doo-hwan's regime (successor to Park Chung-hee) and a negotiated transition in 1987. The current presidential system is characterized by fleeting party organizations and electoral alliances, contrasting with the institutional stability of the sixth republic (Im, 2020).

Similar to South Korea's stance against the North Korean regime, Taiwanese democracy consolidated despite China's permanent threat to its existence. Under the authoritarian rule of the Kuomintang (KMT), the constitutional system of the Republic of China eroded through martial law and Temporary Provisions. The regime established in 1949 began liberalizing in the 1970s, and the transition was overseen by the ruling party by lifting emergency powers in 1991 and reinstating the 1946 Constitution with amendments (Gold, 2020). The current semi-presidential regime saw the rise to power of new parties such as the Democratic Progressive Party and the expansion of civil and social rights cherished in liberal values, such as marriage equality.

Defective democracies

In the remaining ten cases, citizens elect their representatives in elections meeting the minimum requirements for competitiveness and pluralism. However, individual and minority rights are not consistently respected, and institutional checks on Executives are weak.

The full democracies of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan stand as the democratic beacons of Asia. Both political and civil rights are respected; elections are free, fair, and competitive; and systems of checks and balances operate effectively.

Mongolia and East Timor stand out for maintaining competitive political systems with high levels of freedom, although problems of institutional weakness persist. The Mongolian case stands out for its successful transition from a long-standing single-party communist regime established in 1921 to Asia's first post-communist democracy. The dissolution of the USSR, internal fractures in the government, and protests driven by the Mongolian Democratic Union precipitated a peaceful regime change with the 1991 general elections (Lake and Lake, 2022). Its multi-party semi-presidential system is characterized by the alternation between the Mongolian People's Party and the Democratic Party, although corruption and paternalism persist as institutional deficits.

In contrast, East Timor stands out not only as one of Asia's newest democracies, but also as a post-conflict one. Its establishment was facilitated by the international community, both in promoting the 1999 independence referendum and intervening on-site to curb the violence unleashed by pro-annexation militias in Indonesia. The initial elections in the new country in 2001 and 2002 witnessed the transformation of old guerrilla organizations into parties and the rise of new

ones. Despite the resurgence of violence in 2006, the country has stabilized and perseveres as one of the most vibrant democracies in the region. Its semi-presidential system boasts significant political participation, free elections and power alternation, although institutional fragility remains a structural constraint (Beuman, 2016).

The archipelagic cases of the Philippines and Indonesia are also often regarded among the most democratic of this subgroup. The Philippines constitutes a paradigmatic example of transition in the third wave: a popular revolution that ousted the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos and reinstated democracy in 1986. The transitional leadership of Corazon Aquino highlights the significance of women's leadership in Asia's democratization, as observed in the cases of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar, Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia, and Wan Azizah Wan Ismail in Malaysia, among others.²

Since then, the Philippines has held periodic elections with power alternation between different parties and coalitions. The fluidity and short life span of these parties and coalitions characterize a presidential system with low institutionalization organized around prolific families. This is compounded by significant levels of political violence during elections, attacks against journalists, corruption, and armed conflicts between the central government and Islamic and Maoist groups. In this context, populist leaderships like those of Rodrigo Duterte and Bongbong Marcos erode the democratic quality with more repressive policies, restrictions on NGOs, and increased censorship of free expression (Arugay & Baquisal, 2023).

Indonesia's transition was also marked by massive protests that ended three decades of Suharto's corporate and non-competitive regime. Successive governments facilitated peaceful transfers of power and implemented political reforms such as press freedom, human rights protection, and

the restoration of party competition. However, religion is a source of polarization in this country with the world's largest Muslim population. Tensions between more secular and confessional views of politics have driven measures under the current presidency of Joko Widodo that restrict the opposition's ability to engage in the public sphere. This unfolds within a weak institutional context and with the persistent armed conflicts in regions like Aceh and Papua (Mietzner and Aspinall, 2019).

Religious and ethnic tensions are also present in the other two ancient democracies of Asia, India and Sri Lanka. After gaining independence in 1947, India's parliamentary system shifted from being dominated by the Indian National Congress to a two-party system with the rise of the Indian People's Party in the 1980s. While not reaching the levels of conflict seen in its neighbor Sri Lanka, religious tensions have been a source of instability, violence, and illiberal practices. The current government of Narendra Modi has used Hindu nationalism against the Muslim minority, eroding the 'largest democracy in the world' concerning freedom of expression, NGO operations, and minority respect. However, minimal standards of electoral competition and political participation endure (Varshney, 2022).

In contrast, Sri Lanka is a case of coexistence between a democratic regime and a prolonged and devastating armed conflict. After gaining independence in 1948, the exploitation of ethnic, religious, and linguistic cleavages by political elites led to a system strained by Sinhalese nationalism, Tamil separatism, and Buddhist extremism. Elections occurred regularly with power alternation but in an increasingly conflict-ridden context, marked by Sinhalese mob violence against the Tamil minority, Maoist insurgencies, draconian laws, electoral fraud, and the civil war (1983-2009). Although widespread violence subsided, political and economic instability persists due to the disruptive effects of endemic corruption, nepotism, and the dismantling of institutional checks and balances under the populist leadership of the Rajapaksa clan (DeVotta, 2022).

² For an analysis of the link between female political leadership and democratization see Jalalzai and Krook (2010) and Thompson (2002; 2022).

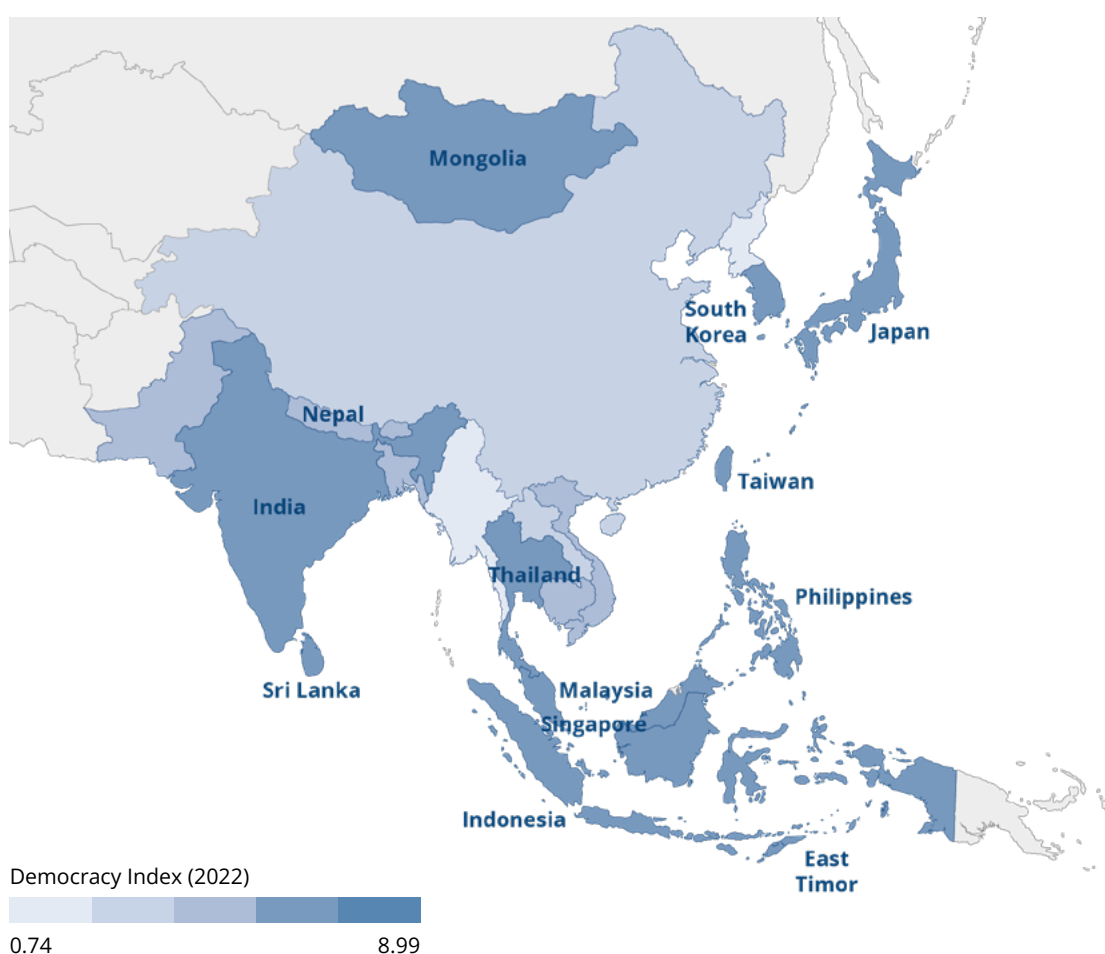
Another case of post-conflict is Nepal, which democratized in 1990 when massive protests ended decades of absolute monarchy under the Panchayat system. However, the instability of elected governments and the civil war (1996-2006) paved the way to an absolutist restoration in 2003. Massive protests and an agreement between opposition parties and Maoist insurgents facilitated the reinstatement of Parliament, the abolition of the monarchy, and a challenging process of constitutional reform that culminated in 2015. In 2008, Nepal became a federal parliamentary republic (Hachhethu and Gellner, 2010) with a political system strained by political instability, endemic corruption and economic hardship. However, the electoral contest meets minimum democratic standards, and the alternation of power has been

recurrent between the Nepali Congress and different expressions of the communist movement.

Finally, the cases of Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand pose difficulties for their analysis in democratic terms. The recurrent military disruptions to Thailand's civilian governments and the hegemonic position of the ruling parties of Malaysia and Singapore leave them on the verge of being considered authoritarian. However, advances in recent years make it possible to keep them in this category and be optimistic about their future.

Malaysia has shown a marked decrease in illiberal practices and registers an increase in democratic quality in almost every respect. Since independence in 1958, the country has been governed by

Figure 3. Values in Freedom House Democracy Index, 2022



Source: Self-generation with data from Freedom House (2023).

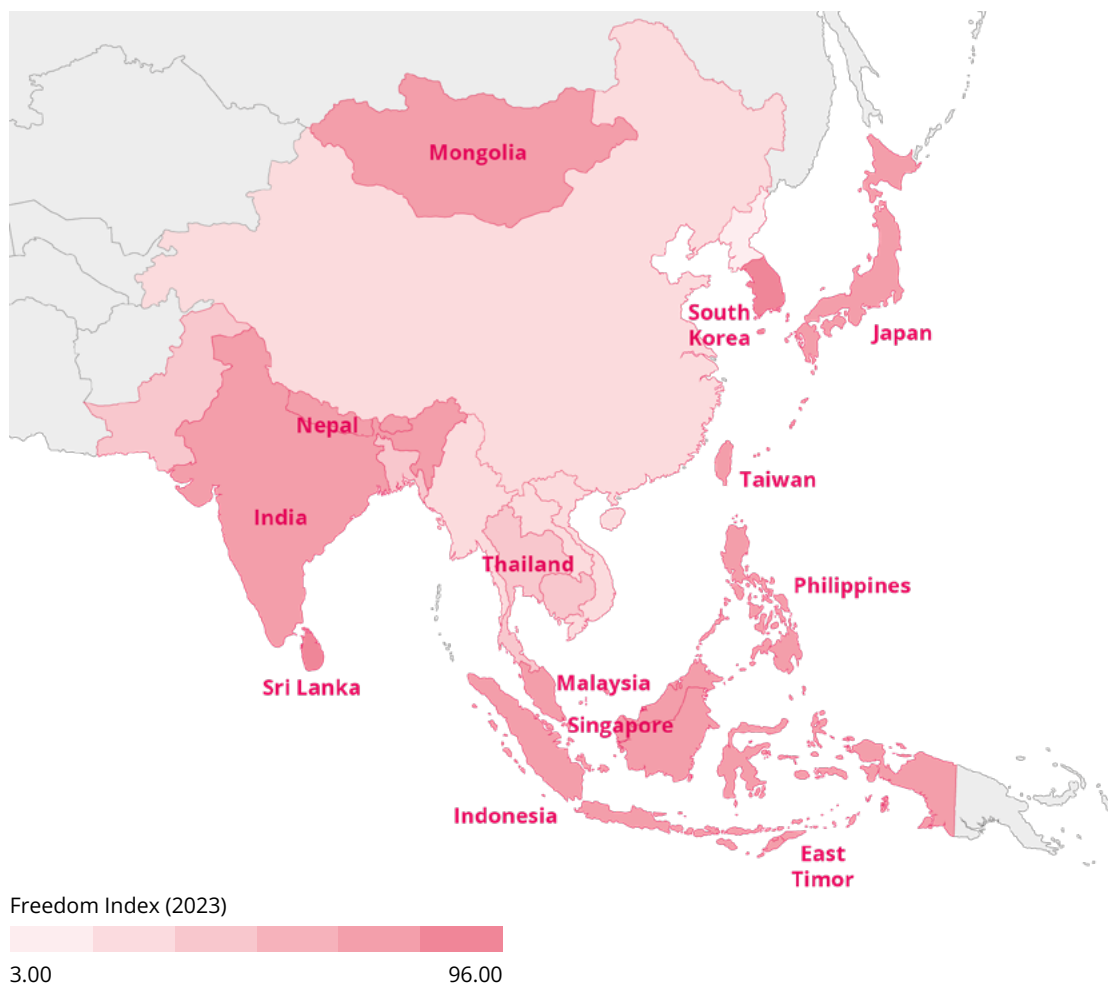
a multi-ethnic alliance of parties now known as the Barisan Nasional (National Front). For most of this period, regular elections were held, but with a “tilted pitch” through multiple electoral regulations and a restricted public sphere. However, the victory of the Pakatan Harapan opposition coalition in 2018 opened a new chapter in the country’s democracy. The dominant party parliamentary system has collapsed to give way to a much more open and competitive one (Gammon, 2022).

Similarly, the People’s Action Party hegemonized Singaporean politics, since independence in 1965, based on a prohibitive electoral system and the suppression of dissent through restrictions on free expression and other civil liberties. However,

the 2011 elections, with the worst performance of the ruling party in its history, revealed the limits of the current system. Since then, the liberalization of the system has been gradually accentuated with a relaxation of restrictions on freedom of expression and association, a greater presence of opposition parties and greater acceptance of diversity as evidenced by the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2022 (Hisasue, 2023).

The most striking aspect about the Malaysian and Singaporean cases is that these advances have been sustained in a regional context of democratic deterioration, as observed in India, the Philippines and Indonesia. Regarding Thailand, there is much to discuss—a country character-

Figure 4. Values in EIU Democracy Index, 2022



Source: Own elaboration with EIU data (2023).

ized by the continuity of military disruptions of civilian governments. Since the establishment of the constitutional monarchy in 1932, the country has witnessed numerous coups and constitutional changes. The almost impossible coexistence between civilian governments, armed forces, and an ineffable monarchy, as per the public opinion (criticism of the monarch is penalized as crimes of *lesa majesty*) persists even after democratization and increasing liberalization in the 1990s (Croissant and Lorenz, 2018).

Following the last coup in 2014, there have been democratic advances with the opening of the political arena and the promise of the Military Junta to rejuvenate the party system. However, this new phase in the democratic life of the country has been marked by legal intricacies that have dissolved parties and nullified seats in Parliament, as well as by the repression of pro-democracy protests. The May 2023 elections dealt a blow to the regime's legitimacy, resulting in a significant victory for opposition parties over candidates backed by the military. The potential of these new forces to advance their reformist agenda (e.g., repeal *lèse-majesté* law) remains as an open question (Li, 2023).

In short, despite the persistence and expansion of illiberal practices, the indices of freedom (Freedom House, 2023) and democracy (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023) depict an overall optimistic situation, with a majority of cases showing values above the global average. In this regard, it is feasible to consider the existence of a consolidated democratic Asia.

Hegemonic disputes and peripheral effects

An analysis of the relationships between Asia and LAC requires, first and foremost, placing them within the global context. Both regions are part of an international system regulated by their two regional powers: China and the United States. The rise of the Asian giant marked a new era of multipolarity, where new actors in the system seek to adapt it to their interests, needs and worldviews.

The hegemonic dispute between the Western model and the one led by Chinese "democracy" confronts two radically different visions in an interdependent world.

The hegemonic dispute between the Western model and the one led by Chinese "democracy" confronts two radically different visions in an interdependent world.

In this clash of visions, liberal democratic values are questioned by culturalist narratives. Arguments from the famous debate on *Asian values* resonate strongly: liberal and individualistic democracy would be incompatible with the Asian culture that ponders merit, discipline and collective well-being based on the State. However, the experience of democratic transitions and the cultural heterogeneity of Asia debunk these legitimizing narratives of authoritarianism (Thompson, 2001).

It seems reasonably clear that the confrontation will be lengthy, much like the Cold War in the last century, alternating moments of conflict and polarization, on the one hand, and periods of relaxation and cooperation, on the other. These stages constitute a structural condition to which the peripheral democracies of Asia and LAC must adapt in defense of their own interests and also to maintain the current international order that integrates them.

Under the personalist and authoritarian leadership of Xi Jinping, inspired by the legalist tradition, China has aggressively advanced its bid of supremacy over the rest of the world. This occurs in a quite unique spatial distribution of the geopolitical stage: unlike the 20th century, where superpowers built their *backyards*, China does not have the advantage of owning one. On the contrary, it

inhabits a region where countries with diverse traditions and religions are clustered, harboring historical distrust and confrontation with the Chinese (Lee and Melissen, 2011). This deficiency is crucial for a country that depends on imports and the control of its trade routes to meet the demands that exceed its production capacity.

LAC's position in the global context has also led to an unprecedented scenario. During the Cold War there was a certain agreement on who was the *hegemon* of each region. *Rival's* interventions in foreign territories were conducted while observing certain forms based on secrecy or the actions of third-party actors. However, the Chinese advancement is strongly felt in LAC, where the United States has seen a decrease in its influence and is currently not viewed as a priority zone in its foreign policy (Schenoni and Malamud, 2021).

While its strategy of economic expansion has collided with the structural problems of peripheral regions, China's political advancement shows greater efficiency, aiming for closer bonds through this avenue. Unlike the 1970s and 1980s, Latin America's link with the West is not entirely clear. On the contrary, governments from both the left and right have found an ideal ally in the Asian power that does not inquire or question when it comes to curtailing freedoms and eroding democratic institutions. This is particularly promising for authoritarian regimes and the populisms that proliferate in the neighborhood (Chaguaceda and Pedrosa, 2021).

Political parties in Asia and LAC

To analyze the relations between democratic Asia and LAC, one must trace the bi-regional interaction since the establishment of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum in 1989. However, this and other bi-regional cooperation instances such as the Forum for Latin America-East Asia Cooperation (FOCALAE -Spanish acronym) have limited potential for integration. Moreover, they are influenced by the participation of authoritarian regimes like China, Cuba, Venezuela and Vietnam.

Similar scenarios emerge concerning relations between political institutions. One example is the International Conference of Asian Political Parties (ICAPP), the largest organization of its kind globally. Despite bringing together seventy parties from 33 countries in the region in its eleventh general assembly, it cannot be considered representative of democratic Asia. This is because it unrestrictedly incorporates parties from authoritarian systems, such as the Communist Party of China and the North Korean Workers' Party. The ICAPP acts as the Asian counterpart of the Permanent Conference of Political Parties of Latin America and the Caribbean (COPPPAL - Spanish acronym), which gathers 72 parties from 29 countries without democratic criteria for admission and includes, among others, parties like the Communist Party of Cuba and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela.

Moreover, in Asia, there are regional groupings of democratic parties based on their ideology. One such group is the Network of Social Democracy in Asia (Socdem Asia), which, akin to LAC, adheres to the Progressive Alliance globally and unites parties from Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Thailand, Nepal, the Philippines, and East Timor. However, there's no equivalent network in LAC, as both the Latin American Socialist Coordination (CSL - Spanish acronym) and the São Paulo Forum include non-democratic parties.

Among associations of democratic Asian parties that find counterparts in LAC is the Federation of Greens of Asia Pacific, a sibling to the Federation of Green Parties of the Americas and part of the Global Greens. However, none of these parties has a consolidated institutional presence and, at best, merely support government coalitions. On the other hand, among associations that gather major parties is the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD), which associates ten parties from across the region with varying degrees of institutional responsibility. This includes parties ranging from the Taiwanese Progressive Democratic Party (currently in government), to the National League for Burmese Democracy, dissolved *de facto* by the military junta and constituted as

a government in exile. This transnational organization of parties has its counterpart in the Liberal Network of Latin America (RELIAL), both connected globally through the Liberal International.

The conservative counterpart of this network is the Asia Pacific Democratic Union (APDU), which, in addition to grouping twelve Asian parties, also includes Latin American parties from Pacific Rim states, such as the Chilean party *Renovación Nacional* or the Salvadoran party *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista*. Additionally, there are other sister networks in the region, such as the Caribbean Democratic Union and the Union of Latin American Parties, all grouped under the umbrella of the International Democratic Union (IDU).

However, these party groupings lack instances of bilateral cooperation, and their interactions are regulated by the corresponding global transnational organizations in each case. Another perti-

nent detail is that this centralization of international relations among the parties in democratic Asia accentuates the complexity of establishing contacts between parties sharing similar ideologies across the Pacific, making party summits or their respective think tanks a rarity.

Diplomatic bonds and commercial relations

Diplomatic relations do not paint a much more encouraging picture than political bonds, as Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are not a priority region for the foreign policies of most democratic governments in Asia. This is because these governments are more focused on their relations with the Global North and their immediate surroundings. This is evident in the number of diplomatic missions in Latin America, which pales in comparison to the presence of major powers.

Number of democratic Asian diplomatic missions in Latin America and the Caribbean

Country	Missions in Latin America	Caribbean Missions
South Korea	19	2
Philippines	4	-
India	13	4
Indonesia	10	1
Japan	30	4
Malaysia	7	-
Mongolia	1	-
Nepal	1	-
Singapore	1	-
Sri Lanka	2	-
Thailand	5	-
Taiwan	10	4
East Timor	2	-

Note: Missions include embassies, consulates, and in the case of Taiwan, representative offices.

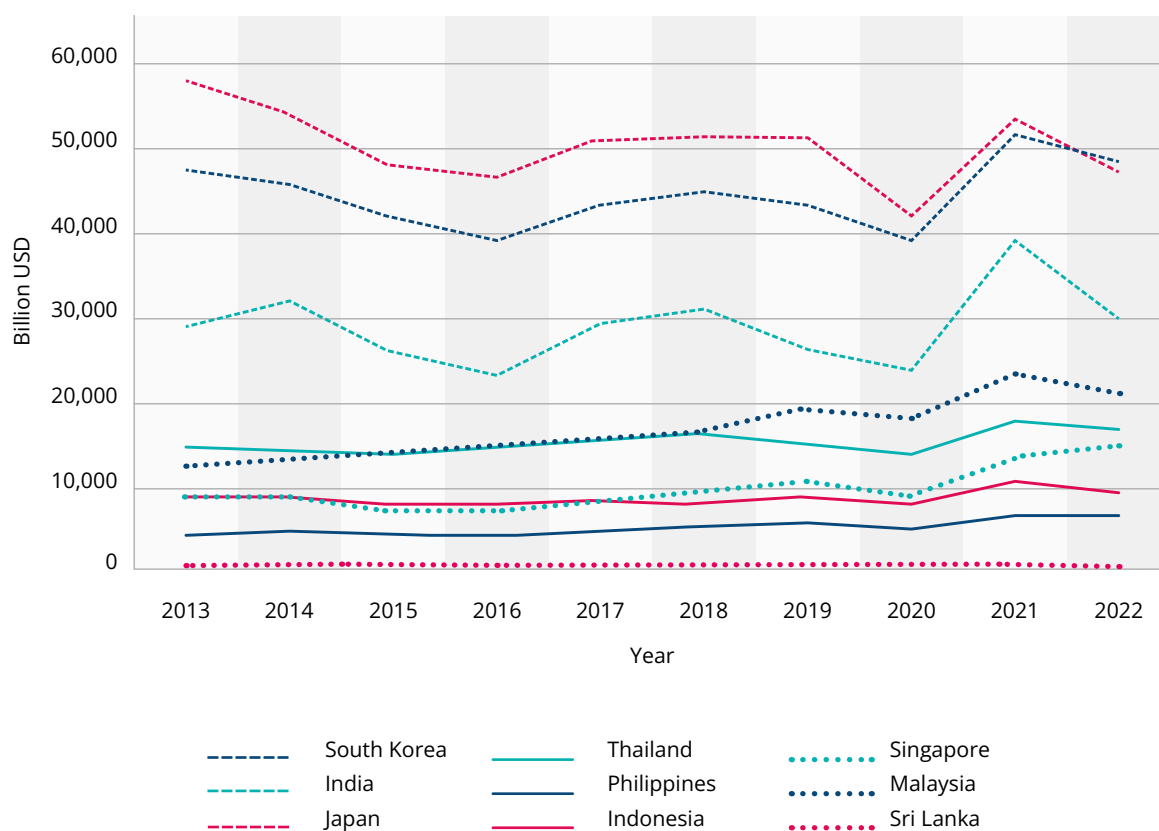
Source: Compiled by authors.

The only notable exception is Japan, partly due to the number of consulates required to serve the sizable *Nikkei* community in Brazil.

This limited diplomatic connection is further emphasized when examining the economic relations between both regions, particularly in their commercial dimension. While the economic bonds have remained relatively stable in recent years, there is still a long way to go to catch up with powers like China, especially when considering relative terms. In this regard, the absence of active diplomatic missions in Latin America and the Caribbean has proven to be an obstacle for commercial brokers interested in bolstering bilateral relations.

This limited connection has resulted in a decline in actual trade between the democratic countries of Asia and LAC. Japan has notably neglected its bilateral economic relationships, despite having numerous diplomatic missions in the region. This indicates that while the relatively low priority that Asian states give to their relations with Latin America is a factor contributing to the poor development in other areas like trade, it is not the only reason. Case-by-case analysis is needed to determine the causes of these shortcomings and, therefore, devise creative solutions to overcome them.

Graph 1. Evolution of trade between the democratic countries of LAC and Asia, 2013-2022



Note: Includes all trade flows between the democratic countries of Asia (except Mongolia, Nepal, Taiwan, and East Timor) and those of Latin America and the Caribbean, excluding Bolivia, Cuba, El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Venezuela.

Source: Self-made using Comtrade data.

Strengthening democratic bonds

The differences and similarities between the democracies of Asia and LAC demonstrate the potential for growth in cooperation between democratic actors in both regions. However, this cannot be achieved as an immediate goal but rather through incremental steps.

Four axes are relevant for working on bilateral relations. The goal is to build a synergy that not only counters the illiberal influence of powers such as China in these regions but also establishes bonds of solidarity that affirm and expand democratic values in the 21st century. In return, bolstering democratic institutions can dismantle or hinder illiberal exchanges in both civil and political aspects, as well as in the economic realm.

The three proposed axes are as follows:

1. *Non-Governmental Organizations*

- Expand and institutionalize relations between pro-democracy NGOs in Asia and LAC.
- Create spaces for common reflection among influencers and the media to exchange experiences and strategies in resisting illiberal influence.
- Generate common agendas and develop actionable agreements with measurable short-, medium- and long-term impacts.

2. *Civil Society Exchanges*

- Increase bilateral exchanges in educational, academic, intellectual, journalistic and political-party activities.
- Centralize universities and academics from both regions around cooperative projects such as research stays and bi-regional events.
- Strengthen the link between Latin American and Caribbean business chambers and business guilds from democratic Asia.

Bolstering democratic institutions can dismantle or hinder illiberal exchanges in both civil and political aspects, as well as in the economic realm.

3. *Political alliances*

- Promote the organization of summits and informal forums focused on discussing political practices in both regions.
- Encourage the establishment of cooperation bodies and diplomatic missions through exchange strategies among elected political representatives and political parties.
- Promotion of networks involving youth, parliamentarians, and youth organizations from both regions.

Conclusions

Discussions about Asia and LAC have been monopolized in recent years by the opportunities stemming from closer relations with China and the dangers of its rivalry with the United States. This has downplayed democracy as a central concern on the international agendas of both regions, even though it continues to be a pivotal issue in national debates. Therefore, it's crucial to highlight the commonalities between Asian democracies and those in Latin America and the Caribbean: from their origins, to the heat of the third wave of democratization, to the challenges posed by new autocratizing leaderships and their foreign promoters.

Many factors unite societies successfully resisting authoritarian temptations thanks to republican political systems and democratic practices. Beyond cultural differences often used to justify violations of constitutional order and legitimize regressions toward illiberal paths, promoting democratic exchange is a must. The experiences in Asia could offer valuable insights for democratic practices in LAC, and vice versa.

Relations among democratic nations on both sides of the Pacific lack intensity across almost all political levels, especially within civil society. In this context, the absence of common agendas among pro-democratic non-governmental organizations is compounded by scarce academic exchanges and a stagnant commercial relationship. To defend democracy, multilateral and bilateral relationships should be encouraged to create a spill-over effect, pushing Latin American and Caribbean actors with institutional responsibility to align with their democratic Asian counterparts.

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