

Opening Statement
The Honorable Ami Bera, M.D.
Chairman, Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation
House Foreign Affairs

America's Way Forward in the Indo-Pacific
Friday, March 19, 2021
10:00 AM ET, virtually

I want to thank Ranking Member Chabot, the members of this subcommittee, our witnesses, and members of the public for joining us at today's hearing.

But before we get started, I want to take a moment to talk about the hate-filled mass shooting in Atlanta earlier this week, and to recognize the pain and trauma it has caused for many across the country.

We have seen a dramatic rise in hate crimes against Asian-Americans over the last year – crimes that tear at the very fabric of what makes this country so strong. And on Tuesday, eight lives were cut short because of this hate, including:

- Daoyou Feng
- Paul Andre Michels
- Hyeon Jeong Park
- Julie Park
- Xiaojie Tan
- Delania Ashley Yaun
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Diversity, inclusion, and respect for human rights make us stronger at home and abroad. So I call on all of us today to be mindful of our language – to distinguish between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese people – and to lead by example to facilitate respectful discussions as we tackle the challenges ahead.

Today marks the first hearing of the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation, and today's hearing, titled "America's Way Forward in the Indo-Pacific," could not be timelier.

From the first-ever leaders' summit of the quadrilateral security dialogue, to the high-level trips Secretaries Tony Blinken and Lloyd Austin made to Asia just earlier this week, it is apparent the region holds immense potential for the United States when we work with our allies and partners.

I am eager to hearing from my colleagues and our esteemed witnesses about their views on the challenges and opportunities ahead for the United States in the Indo-Pacific, and how our Subcommittee can lead Congressional efforts to strengthen U.S. ties to the region and yield benefits for both the American people and our friends in Asia.

Challenges

As we open our discussion today about the way forward in the Indo-Pacific, I am struck by the enormity and the consequence of the challenges we face.

China is the greatest geopolitical challenge we have faced in decades, if not in a generation. From the unconscionable human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Tibet and erosion of Hong Kong's high-degree of autonomy; to the increased aggression in the South and East China Sea and across the Taiwan Strait; to the use of coercive trade measures against countries that pursue policies Beijing does not like, the Chinese government has repeatedly shown it seeks a world more conducive to China's interests and values, many of which are contrary to our own.

We have done much work over the past several years to collectively understand the challenge the Chinese Communist Party poses; now we need to organize around the solutions. I am confident today's discussion will lay the foundation for us to build a robust and enduring Congressional response to China – a conversation this subcommittee will continue throughout the year.

But the Indo-Pacific is also about so much more than China, and the challenges we face elsewhere in this consequential region are equally daunting.

We have seen continued democratic backsliding in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, where freedoms of expression and assembly are particularly under siege. We have a coup in Burma, where the military is unleashing lethal violence on protestors. In neighboring Thailand, the increasingly severe use of lèse-majesté laws to curtail criticism of the monarchy runs contrary to the very values that bind many of our strongest relationships in the region.

After nearly two decades in Afghanistan, we must decide how best to reduce ongoing violence and bring peace to this worn-torn country through an Afghan-led process. We have invested far too much blood and treasure to walk away without a carefully planned way forward, yet many American civilians and veterans alike say it is time for our nation to free up resources for other urgent needs—at home and abroad. How we conclude this conflict has implications for our NATO allies and Afghan partners—all of whom sacrificed greatly to get to where we are today—and the long-term stability of the region.

And we must not forget the North Korea and its illicit weapons program, which continues to threaten U.S. allies and broader regional stability despite diplomatic overtures by the United States.

Opportunities

But the Indo-Pacific also continues to hold significant promise and opportunity for the United States, in large part because of the friendship and partnership of regional actors and organizations. In the two months since President Biden took office, I have been pleased to see that he and his administration are committed to working with allies and partners to advance security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

We see the opportunity to regain the trust and confidence of our friends and be a force multiplier for good by working together to expand safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine manufacturing and equitable distribution, to combat global warming, and to advance freedom, inclusivity and prosperity for the American people and for those in the region.

We also see the opportunities created by our partners like Australia, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and Southeast Asian nations, who have each taken on a greater role in supporting regional stability and our shared values on issues like freedom of navigation and maritime security. We look forward to also working with them in defense of our mutual commitments to democratic norms, good governance, and rule of law, and to building a united front in facing economic and military aggression in the region.

Moreover, Taiwan has again shown its willingness and ability to be a responsible partner in promoting freedom, security, and peace worldwide despite the Chinese government's unrelenting attempts to isolate the island. Nowhere has this been more evident than in Taipei's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which Taiwan generously extended a helping hand to the international community to combat the pandemic. Taiwan offers so much important expertise, and we should welcome it.

Way Forward

In light of these many challenges and opportunities, what should we prioritize over the next year? How can we work with the Executive Branch to build a coalition with our partners in the region—and those outside of the Indo-Pacific—around the challenges we face from Beijing, Pyongyang, and elsewhere? Where can Members further support the Biden administration's message, and where can we be the "bad cop" to give the executive branch necessary political cover? What legislation should we consider to ensure the United States and our allies have the tools and resources necessary to compete with China?

These are just some of the tough questions I hope our witnesses can help answer today.

I am grateful we have the platform and expertise in our witnesses today to lay a foundation for Members as we identify priorities and challenges for the United States and our partners in the Indo-Pacific region.

I now yield five minutes to my friend from Ohio, our Ranking Member, Representative Steve Chabot, for any opening comments he may have.