

Remarks

Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

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SECRETARY TILLERSON: Good morning, all, and welcome to the ninth ministerial of the meeting of the Community of Democracies. It's really an honor for us to host this ministerial here in Washington in the United States for the first time, and so welcome to all of you, and we're just delighted that you are here.

I also want to congratulate Thomas Garrett on his new role as secretary-general of the Community of Democracies. He is an excellent choice to hold this position at this very important time, and thank you, Secretary-General, for your dedication to leading this organization and for defending democracy.

We're grateful to the foreign ministers, the government delegations, members of civil society, as well as business leaders, and most particularly, the young people who have traveled from around the world to be with us today. Thank you for making the effort to join us. The collective efforts of those in this room to defend democratic progress and resist anti-democratic trends are deeply appreciated, and the United States is proud to participate in this shared work that we're all about.

We know that this ministerial could not come at a more critical moment. Across the globe, democratic nations and peoples are under threat. In East Asia, an increasingly aggressive and isolated regime in North Korea threatens democracies in South Korea, Japan, and more importantly and more recently, has expanded those threats to the United States, endangering the entire world. In the Middle East, Iran exports terrorism and violence, threatening democracies from Israel to Europe and other regions. In other regions, once-thriving democracies are retreating from or actively subverting democratic values, such as in Venezuela. And finally, we must support emerging democracies in the struggle to become nations that respect human rights regardless of ethnicity, such as the case in Burma.

The global challenge to the democratic ideal is real. That's why we're here today. That's why this gathering exists. We know that democracy is the form of governance that produces peace, stability, and prosperity at home and abroad. We know that governments that uphold democratic principles and practices are safer, healthier, more secure, more prosperous societies, and are more inclined to respect the human rights of their citizens. Democratic governments are accountable to the people, and as a result, are less susceptible to corruption, more likely to

support an independent and fair judicial system, and more likely to peacefully sustain a vibrant, diverse society.

As a Community of Democracies, we also know that our shared values translate to more dependable security partners and reliable allies in the fight against terrorism. We know that democracies are not flawless. All of us remain works in progress. Successful democracies require hard choices, hard work, and vigilance. But democracy is the only political system that contains an institutional capacity for self-correction, one that grants its citizens the right to participate in how and by whom they are governed. And that is why we support the expansion of freedom and democracy throughout the world.

At a time of growing efforts to undermine democracy, it is all the more critical that we work together to bolster and promote this form of governance. So despite the challenges of our day, now is not the time to step back from our democratic commitments. Now is the time to strengthen and sustain them. We cannot become complacent. Rather, we must continue our active advocacy and engagement. Two months ago, President Trump delivered a speech in the same city where this group was founded and where its secretariat is housed. Before the Polish people, the President reaffirmed this shared commitment to advancing freedom. He said, and I quote, “Above all, we value the dignity of every human life, protect the rights of every person, and share the hope of every soul to live in freedom. That is who we are,” end of quote.

That is who we are as Americans. In our Declaration of Independence, our founders boldly stated that all are endowed by their creator with the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Americans are committed to standing up for democratic principles, practices, and our partners around the world. It is not only central to our foreign policy; it is who we are as a people. And it is these shared values that bind us to our closest allies. That is why in every foreign policy challenge we face, we engage our democratic partners first.

As we consider the best offense posed by a hostile regime in North Korea, the least free nation on the planet, we first look to our regional allies, South Korea and Japan. By working with them and other democratic partners, we continue to build consensus at the United Nations Security Council to create a united international front that upholds our values and strives to make us safer. But North Korea is now a global threat, and it requires a global response from all nations.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, we continue to engage our partners regularly and particularly through the Organization of American States as we consider every diplomatic and economic tool to restore Venezuela’s democratic institutions.

In the Middle East, Iran oversees a threat network of proxies who export terror and violence. They destabilize countries throughout the region. In response, the United States works closely with our allies in Europe, and our ally Israel, to address these threats while also supporting a strong, more resilient democracy emerging in Iraq.

And when countries like Russia threaten their democratic neighbors by attacking the very foundation of our democracies, by meddling in our free and fair elections, we stand with our democratic partners. We call for greater vigilance and we work together to safeguard our democracies from interference in the future.

This is who we are as a Community of Democracies, working to advance our shared democratic principles to create a more free, a more prosperous, and a more secure world.

In June 2000, the Community of Democracies affirmed in the opening lines of the Warsaw Declaration, “The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government, as expressed by exercise of right and civic duties of citizens to choose their representatives through regular, free, and fair elections with universal and equal suffrage, open to multiple parties, conducted by secret ballot, monitored by independent electoral authorities, and free of fraud and intimidation.” This belief in and dedication to democracy was once a radical idea, but today this is who we all are.

Today the Washington ministerial is the culmination of our tenure as president of the Community of Democracies, but it is also a reaffirmation of the importance of the Community of Democracies, and our commitment to the democratic ideal at a time when freedom needs defending. With growing attacks on civil society, threats to judicial independence, the undermining of effective democratic institutions, and disrespect for the citizens who are central to democracy’s success, it is even more important for our nations and for us as individuals to reaffirm our commitment to the Warsaw principles. The values and the principles we espouse lead to greater security and more prosperity. As we work together to protect our values, promote democratic institutions, and increase our resolve against the undemocratic regimes that threaten them, we all will be guided by these shared values.

So to conclude, let us together, government and civil society, do all that we can to live up to and be an example of the Warsaw principles, to live up to the principles of democratic governance and to do so for future generations and a more peaceful, prosperous, and secure world. I thank you for your kind attention. (Applause.)

And now it is my pleasure to welcome Secretary General of the Community of Democracies Thomas Garrett for his remarks. Welcome, Secretary General.

(Applause.)

SECRETARY GENERAL GARRETT: Thank you very much, sir. Excellencies, Governing Council members, representatives of civil society, our distinguished guests and colleagues, good morning and welcome to the Governing Council Ministerial Meeting of the Community of Democracies.

Let me begin by thanking Secretary of State Rex Tillerson for hosting this ministerial. I also want to thank you, sir, for the stewardship shown by the United States in its presidency of the Community of Democracies. We especially want to commend to you the staff of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor here at State who led the U.S. effort in achieving an impressive set of accomplishments with the Community of Democracies these last two years.

Also working closely with the State Department and with the Governing Council was the staff at the Permanent Secretariat at the Community of Democracies in Warsaw. They have done and continue to perform outstanding service to this body.

And let me also express my most sincere appreciation to the Government of Poland, represented here by Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski, for Poland's long and sustained commitment to the Community of Democracies. We are actually very privileged today to have the two originating countries, America and Poland, represented here by their foreign ministers.

We are also joined today by civil society representatives from around the world. These people are our key partners at the Community of Democracies for freedom and justice. The former foreign minister of Poland, the late Bronislaw Geremek, who was a founder of the Community of Democracies said, "Regardless of the problems inseparably associated with democracy, it is a system which best fulfills the aspirations of individuals, societies, and entire peoples, and most fully satisfies their needs of development, empowerment, and creativity." He believed then as we do at the Community of Democracies today that democracy is the only sustainable form of governance that can create the necessary conditions for development, respect for human rights, peace, and stability.

We know that there is no single model of democracy that all countries must follow. We also know that democracy does not belong to any one country alone, but democratic ideas and values, I believe, speak to every person. We also know that the work of democracy is never done. The struggle for democracy is long and sometimes uncertain. Because of this, I believe the need for this body, the Community of Democracies, is more urgent now today than ever before.

The Community of Democracies brings together young and old democracies to strengthen representative government by sharing experiences and through coordination of policies. Very often the help given appears modest. As former Secretary of State Condi Rice said recently, "Democracy assistance is not always dramatic, but I can tell you support to democracy is important." Those united around freedom and democracy need to come to one another's aid, need to come to one another's support.

The 2000 founding of the ceremony of the Community of Democracies was a moment of optimism. I know that many of you were there. And it has been somewhat overshadowed since by a decade of conflict, of struggle against rising authoritarianism, with an erosion of democratic values, economic downturns, and the rise of violent extremism.

The U.S. presidency asked the Community of Democracies to think outside the traditional list of democracy programs in order to meet these challenges. And so the Community of Democracies put into action three priorities. The first was democracy and security; second was democracy and development; and third was strengthening of civic space.

So very briefly, let me just say that under the first priority a research project examined the correlation between democracy and security. Its findings were released this week in Washington, but among its findings were democracy is the best way forward to achieve peace and stability, which are foundations for growth and prosperity.

The second priority of the U.S. presidency was democracy and development. Goal number 16 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda encourages respect for human rights, the rule of law, equal access to justice for everyone and effective, accountable and inclusive institutions. The Community of Democracies launched an initiative aimed at creating voluntary supplemental indicators for Goal 16. We will be working with all of you to use these voluntary indicators as a tool to assess progress towards the achievement of Goal 16 and democratic development.

Lastly, let me highlight the third priority of the Community of Democracies during this Presidency. To us there is a very clear and an essential relationship between democracy and civil society. Under the U.S. presidency, the Governing Council of the Community of Democracies adopted civil society standards, which reaffirmed the important role that civil society plays in all aspects of democratic governance and development, and committed to increase governmental support for civil society at a time when many countries are still imposing restrictions on civic space that are incompatible with democracy. With these standards we have, as a Community of Democracies, have committed to a long term effort to promote and to protect civic space.

Today is a special day in many ways. It is the ninth ministerial gathering of the Community of Democracies. It's also the International Day of Democracy. The theme of this year's International Day of Democracy is to strengthen democratic institutions to promote peace and stability. Reinforcing this, the priorities of the U.S. presidency and the work of the Governing Council, with civil society, came together through common action at the Community of Democracies. It's through such common action that we can address complex challenges to democracy.

Members of the Governing Council, participating states, civil society, we the Community of Democracies must continue to support one another on this path to democracy, assisting with the consolidation of democratic institutions, widening the space for civil society, and strengthening the rule of law. We must continue to play a key role in shaping strategies for democratic governments with civil society to address the root causes of violent extremism, and to pursue strategies of security and peace in accordance with democratic values and principles.

So today, as we meet at the ministerial and as we celebrate the International Day of Democracy, let us state again our intention to continue working together – governments and civil society – to

strengthen democratic institutions and to uphold the principles enshrined 17 years ago in the Warsaw Declaration. Again, let me welcome you to this Ninth Ministerial of the Community of Democracies, and thank you for your commitment and engagement. Thank you.