

# The Strategic Implications of India's Illiberalism and Democratic Erosion

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**NOTE** ≈ The author wishes to thank Jacob Larsen and Zaara Wakeel for their research assistance and two anonymous Asia Policy reviewers for their insightful feedback.

**KEYWORDS:** INDIA; U.S.-INDIA RELATIONS; DEMOCRACY; LIBERALISM; STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This article assesses the international implications of illiberalism and democratic erosion in India's domestic politics and considers whether and how Washington should recalibrate its strategic partnership with New Delhi.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

The U.S.-India relationship is founded on common interests, including a deepening strategic convergence with respect to China. U.S. policymakers also cite a shared commitment to liberal democratic governance as a central reason for closer alignment with India. Yet India's prevailing political culture is not best defined as "liberal," and under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's commitment to democracy is increasingly in doubt. Erosion is most obvious in the areas of tightened media controls, limits on civil society organizations, and reduced protections for minorities. The evolving character of India's domestic politics is likely to influence India's foreign policy aims and decision-making processes, hard-power capabilities, and the way India relates to other states, including the U.S.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The U.S.-India strategic partnership is strong and likely to remain durable because of shared concerns about China's power and influence. Yet because India's domestic political culture and international worldview reflect unique historical, ideological, and cultural wellsprings, U.S. policymakers should not assume U.S.-India convergence on liberal aims, including India's commitment to the defense of the liberal international order.
- Rhetorically, the Biden administration has attached great significance to liberal democracy and thus risks politically costly criticism if it appears to ignore undemocratic trends in India. To avoid hypocrisy and, most importantly, to set realistic expectations for U.S.-India partnership, U.S. officials should convey their concerns about India's political trajectory forthrightly but bearing in mind that the U.S. has little influence over India's internal politics.
- Further erosion of democratic institutions and practices would, on balance, make India a less powerful and predictable international actor, and would reduce its capacity for reassurance and building partnerships with other states, including the U.S.
- The U.S. government should monitor political developments in India. If democratic erosion worsens, managing U.S. relations with India will demand a tricky balancing act that preserves and even strengthens partnership in areas deemed critical to geopolitical competition with China without extending U.S.-India cooperation into areas that would mistake India for an entirely like-minded U.S. treaty ally.

The increasingly close strategic partnership between the United States and India represents one of the most significant geopolitical developments of the past two decades. Whereas the United States and India were “estranged democracies” throughout most of the Cold War, in the 21st century U.S. presidents and Indian prime ministers have taken turns echoing versions of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s characterization of the two countries as “natural allies.”<sup>1</sup> A bipartisan consensus in the U.S. Congress favors ever-closer U.S.-India ties, and a majority of Indians view the United States favorably.<sup>2</sup>

The bilateral partnership has multiple, often mutually reinforcing, wellsprings, starting with shared strategic concerns about the rise of an assertive China in Asia. The two states have signed a series of bilateral agreements to enable deeper military cooperation, and total U.S. defense trade with India has grown from near zero in 2008 to over \$20 billion in 2020.<sup>3</sup> Economic and educational ties also bind. Successive generations of Indians have found opportunities in the United States, and U.S. businesses have more and more come to appreciate India’s potential as a huge, developing economy. Total U.S.-India trade grew from \$48.8 billion in 2010 to \$78.3 billion in 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout this remarkable renaissance in bilateral relations, both sides have also routinely touted their shared principles as the world’s oldest and largest democracies. The Biden administration, even more than its predecessors, has taken pains to point out that common values unite India and the United States just as they differentiate the two from authoritarian China. Yet ever since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept into national power in May 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s policies have raised doubts about his government’s commitment to liberal democratic practices. By 2021, India had slipped in three major global

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Kux, *India and the United States: Estranged Democracies* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1993); and Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, “India, USA and the World: Let Us Work Together to Solve the Political-Economic Y2K Problem” (speech to the Asia Society, New York, September 28, 1998) ∞ <https://asiasociety.org/india-usa-and-world-let-us-work-together-solve-political-economic-y2k-problem>.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, 60% of Indians viewed the United States favorably as of 2019. See Pew Research Center, Global Indicators Database ∞ <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/indicator/1/country/in>. For American attitudes about India, see Gallup, “Country Ratings” ∞ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1624/perceptions-foreign-countries.aspx>. Reflecting wide congressional support for India, there are 31 members of the India caucus (22 Democrat and 9 Republican) in the U.S. Senate and 67 members of the India caucus (53 Democrat and 14 Republican) in the U.S. House of Representatives. See “Senate India Caucus,” Mark R. Warner ∞ <https://www.warner.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/senate-india-caucus>; and “U.S. India Caucus,” Capitol Impact ∞ [https://www.ciclt.net/sn/leg\\_app/poc\\_detail.aspx?P\\_ID=&ClientCode=gsba&LegComID=19271](https://www.ciclt.net/sn/leg_app/poc_detail.aspx?P_ID=&ClientCode=gsba&LegComID=19271).

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, “U.S. Security Cooperation with India,” Fact Sheet, January 20, 2021 ∞ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-india>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Trade in Goods with India” ∞ <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5330.html>.

political rankings: the U.S.-based Freedom House dropped India from “free” to “partly free,” the Swedish V-Dem Research Institute downgraded India from an “electoral democracy” to an “electoral autocracy,” and the London-based Economist Intelligence Unit characterized India as a “flawed democracy.”<sup>5</sup>

All these characterizations of India’s political practices and institutions warrant closer scrutiny as they are hardly uncontested. In combination, however, they convincingly raise doubts about India’s inclusion as a member of the liberal democratic community of nations, and whether the United States should continue to hold such expectations as it structures its strategic partnership with India.

Looking to the future, how differently would an illiberal, even autocratic India act on the world stage? Answering this question is not as straightforward as it might appear. It requires a systematic discussion of the various pathways that have the potential to link India’s domestic politics with international outcomes. In the end, a full analysis of these pathways provides a compelling case that the character of India’s domestic politics will shape its international affairs and, more than that, offers insight into how India is likely to interact with the world differently if it slides further into illiberal, undemocratic patterns.

To be clear, India’s political trajectory is uncertain, and there are still good reasons to imagine that its future could be more, rather than less, democratic. However, if India continues along its current path, Washington should above all avoid policies founded on false assumptions about India’s values and aims. Although an illiberal or autocratic India might still prove itself a dedicated and strategically valuable counterweight to China in the Indo-Pacific, it would not be a committed partner in the defense of a liberal world order in the ways that the Biden administration has vowed to prioritize. In addition, an illiberal and autocratic India would, on balance, also be less capable, less trusted, less influential, more riven by domestic and regional conflict, and less inclined to share common views with the United States on other global economic, security, or diplomatic priorities.

This article is organized as follows:

- ≈ pp. 81–84 examine the assumptions in the argument that common values unite India and the United States and analyze their logical implications for U.S. policy.

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<sup>5</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2021: India” ≈ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2021>; Nafiza Alizada et al., “Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021,” V-Dem Institute, 2021 ≈ <https://www.v-dem.net/files/25/DR%202021.pdf>; and Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2020: In Sickness and in Health?” 2021, 10.

- ≈ pp. 84–91 scrutinize recent characterizations of India's political practices and institutions as backsliding on the country's democratic principles.
- ≈ pp. 91–100 examine four pathways that have the potential to link India's domestic politics with international outcomes, including how India's domestic politics could affect its overseas aims, policy processes, hard power capabilities, and the perceptions and politics of other states.
- ≈ pp. 100–105 offer implications and recommendations from this analysis for U.S. policy.

### THE ASSUMPTIONS AND LOGIC OF U.S. PARTNERSHIP WITH INDIA

Far more than its predecessor, the Biden administration has publicly trumpeted its commitment to liberalism and democracy both at home and abroad. For President Joe Biden, democracy is “the heart of who we are and how we see the world—and how the world sees us.”<sup>6</sup> According to Biden and his top appointees, a shared commitment to liberal democratic principles is the foundation for the United States' most important alliances, such as NATO, and serves as the ordering principle for the administration's global strategy.<sup>7</sup> Contrary to pure power-politics reasoning, the president and senior officials like National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan argue, for instance, that U.S. competition with China is part of a wider “competition of models with autocracies, and we are trying to show the world that American democracy and democracy writ large can work.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to establishing a baseline for which countries the United States counts as allies and which countries as competitors, Secretary of State Antony Blinken has publicly explained the administration's logic about how regime type affects international relationships.<sup>9</sup> According to Blinken, strong democracies make better partners for the United States because they are also more likely to be politically stable, less prone to conflict, and more dependable economic partners. Weak democracies, by contrast, are more prone to

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Why America Must Lead Again,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020 ∞ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

<sup>7</sup> See also Hal Brands, “The Emerging Biden Doctrine,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 2021 ∞ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-29/emerging-biden-doctrine>.

<sup>8</sup> Jen Psaki and Jake Sullivan, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, June 7, 2021,” White House, June 7, 2021 ∞ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/06/07/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-and-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-june-7-2021>.

<sup>9</sup> Antony J. Blinken, “A Foreign Policy for the American People” (speech, Washington, D.C., March 3, 2021) ∞ <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people>.

destabilizing domestic and foreign influences and are thus less reliable U.S. partners. Autocratic states are even more prone to conflict and less likely to support the “rules-based international order that the United States and [its] allies have built and invested in for decades and decades.”<sup>10</sup>

The Biden administration’s rhetoric and reasoning are open to criticism on a variety of familiar grounds. Above all, these liberal democratic values have only ever been imperfectly practiced at home, and in recent years especially the threat of illiberal and undemocratic forces in U.S. domestic politics has been the subject of intense and extensive public debate. In addition, U.S. foreign policy has always reflected a multiplicity of interests that includes but is not exclusively defined by principles of liberalism or democracy. Accordingly, friends and adversaries of the United States could all be forgiven for questioning whether the Biden administration’s rhetoric will be matched by capabilities, resources, and commitments. And although post–World War II U.S. foreign policy has consistently reflected aspects of liberal internationalism, the dramatic whiplash of transitions from Obama to Trump to Biden raises legitimate questions about what sort of foreign policy the United States will follow next.

The Biden administration’s early track record is mixed with respect to the application of liberal values in foreign policy.<sup>11</sup> Yet the president has remained steadfast in his public defense of liberalism and democracy. At his September 2021 speech to the UN General Assembly he stated, “As we pursue diplomacy across the board, the United States will champion the democratic values that go to the very heart of who we are as a nation and a people: freedom, equality, opportunity, and a belief in the universal rights of all people.”<sup>12</sup> By its consistent use of such language and logic, the Biden administration raises the political costs of pursuing policies that clearly contradict liberal, democratic principles. As compared to an avowedly “realist” or illiberal regime, the Biden administration exposes itself to charges of hypocrisy. Attentive audiences at home (voters) and abroad (allies and adversaries) will reward or punish the administration accordingly.

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<sup>10</sup> Antony J. Blinken, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken on Release of the 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices,” U.S. Department of State, March 30, 2021 ≈ <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-on-release-of-the-2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices>.

<sup>11</sup> Nahal Toosi, “Biden Pulls Punches on Rights Abusers,” *Politico*, September 15, 2021 ≈ <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/09/15/saudi-myanmar-egypt-biden-rights-abusers-511911>.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph R. Biden Jr. (remarks at the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, New York, September 21, 2021) ≈ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/09/21/remarks-by-president-biden-before-the-76th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly>.

The administration has also been unwavering in how it has characterized the logic of tightening relations with India. The Biden administration has considered India a member in good standing within the democratic community of nations, and therefore more likely to be a dependable partner. As Blinken explained during his July 2021 trip to New Delhi, “The relationship between our two countries is so important and so strong because it is a relationship between our democracies. One of the elements that Americans admire most about India is the steadfast commitment of its people to democracy, pluralism, to human rights and fundamental freedoms.”<sup>13</sup>

On taking office, Biden, as one of his first major diplomatic acts, convened an unprecedented leader-level summit of the Quad (virtually) with the prime ministers of Japan, Australia, and India on March 12, 2021. In doing so, he sent the unmistakable message that India is critically important to the United States’ geopolitical competition with China, not merely because of its geographic location, enormous population, or growing economy, but because India is a fundamentally like-minded state similar to the United States’ other democratic treaty allies. Biden was not alone; the joint statement from the summit signed by all four leaders declared their intention to “strive for a region that is free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion.”<sup>14</sup>

This perspective on India is widely, if not universally, shared in Washington, including in the U.S. Congress. However, as Modi’s government has received criticism for illiberal and increasingly undemocratic practices, some of that consensus has started to fray, most notably on Capitol Hill.<sup>15</sup> In March 2021, just before Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin took his first official trip to India, Senator Robert Menendez, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, wrote to express his concerns. A self-described supporter of close

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<sup>13</sup> Suhasini Haidar, “Democratic Values Bind India, U.S., Says Blinken,” *Hindu*, July 28, 2021 ~ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indian-democracy-is-powered-by-its-freethinking-citizens-blinken/article35583397.ece>.

<sup>14</sup> “Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement: “The Spirit of the Quad,” White House, March 12, 2021 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad>.

<sup>15</sup> Earlier examples include Democratic senator Elizabeth Warren’s 2019 concerns about Kashmiri rights and Democratic representative Pramila Jayapal’s 2019 opinion piece reflecting her concerns about “fundamental principles of democracy such as freedom of the press, religious freedom and due process,” as well as her co-sponsored resolution on Kashmir with Republican representative Steve Watkins. See “Democratic Presidential Candidate Elizabeth Warren Urges India to Respect Rights of People of Kashmir,” *Hindu*, October 5, 2019 ~ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/democratic-presidential-candidate-elizabeth-warren-urges-india-to-respect-rights-of-people-of-kashmir/article29606299.ece>; and Pramila Jayapal, “India’s Foreign Minister Refused to Meet Me. I Won’t Stop Speaking Out on Human Rights,” *Washington Post*, December 23, 2019 ~ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/12/23/indias-foreign-minister-refused-meet-me-i-wont-stop-speaking-out-human-rights>.

U.S.-India ties, he explained that “the partnership is strongest when based on shared democratic values and the Indian government has been trending away from those values.”<sup>16</sup> Menendez specifically criticized the Indian government’s treatment of protesting farmers, journalists, and political opponents. He identified state policies like the Citizenship Amendment Act, abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir, and use of sedition laws as evidence of the “deteriorating situation of democracy.”<sup>17</sup>

Menendez’s policy critique was significant because it accepted the Biden administration’s core logic: that the U.S.-India partnership is strategically valuable in part because it is founded on shared principles. Where the senator parted ways with this logic was over whether India’s government actually shares those principles. This raises at least two questions: First, is this dire assessment of India’s democratic erosion correct? And second, if so, precisely how should we anticipate the international consequences of that erosion?

#### ASSESSING INDIA’S POLITICAL TRAJECTORY

The Modi government has not been shy about refuting criticism of its democratic credentials. Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar castigated the “hypocrisy” of Western institutions V-Dem and Freedom House, accusing them of inventing artificial rules and parameters for judging the political characteristics of other nations.<sup>18</sup> Other analysts have pointed out that any such rankings are inherently subjective because they assign quantitative weights to assessments of complex institutional structures, policies, and practices that may be deeply dissimilar between one state and the next.<sup>19</sup> In addition, critiques of the Modi government may fail to draw clear distinctions between concepts like “freedom,” “democracy,” and “liberalism” in ways that lead to confusion about precisely what political changes—if any—are underway. Similarly, just because Modi’s political opponents depict his policies as “autocratic” or “undemocratic” does not make them so. Indeed, the protected right of opposition parties to castigate

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Menendez to Lloyd J. Austin, U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 17, 2021, ~ <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/03-17-21%20RM%20letter%20to%20Austin%20re%20India%20trip.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Each of these charges will be explained in greater detail later in this article.

<sup>18</sup> Shubhajit Roy, “Jaishankar on Global Democracy Downgrade: ‘Custodians Can’t Stomach We Don’t Want Their Approval,’” *Indian Express*, March 15, 2021 ~ <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/global-democracy-downgrade-custodians-cant-stomach-we-dont-want-their-approval-7228422>.

<sup>19</sup> Soutik Biswas, “‘Electoral Autocracy’: The Downgrading of India’s Democracy,” BBC, March 16, 2021 ~ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-56393944>.



India's elected leaders demonstrates a persistent commitment to certain core principles of democracy.<sup>20</sup>

With these caveats in mind, it is worth reviewing the evidence of India's political condition in greater detail. Two main findings stand out. First, the Modi government has indeed undertaken a range of policies that normally weaken important institutions associated with the practice of democracy, but India also retains some essential democratic qualities and does not yet appear to have passed a point of no return. The most compelling evidence of such erosion under the Modi government is found in three areas: tightened media controls, limits on civil society organizations, and reduced protections for minorities. Second, during its time in power, Modi's political party has pursued policies that reflect a Hindu nationalist ideology that is at odds with core liberal tenets, but these developments should be appreciated in appropriate context without exaggerating India's historical attachments to liberalism in economic, political, or social spheres.

Both the Freedom House and V-Dem studies identify government interference in India's media as one of the most significant anti-democratic trends. In its quantitative review of the decade from 2010 to 2020, V-Dem finds deteriorating conditions with respect to government censorship, media bias, critical media, media self-censorship, and harassment of journalists.<sup>21</sup> Freedom House concludes that "attacks on press freedom have escalated dramatically under the Modi government, and reporting has become significantly less ambitious in recent years."<sup>22</sup> As the organization Reporters Without Borders notes in its 2021 World Press Freedom Index, Indian journalists face the threat of online and physical harassment from hardcore Hindu nationalist supporters of the Modi government as well as severe legal action by the state's overly broad application of colonial-era sedition laws that authorize the punishment of an individual who "brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards, the Government."<sup>23</sup> In May 2021, a three-judge bench of India's Supreme

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<sup>20</sup> Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi, for instance, has drawn comparisons between Modi's authoritarianism and that of Saddam Hussein and Moammar Gadhafi. See Sadanand Dhume, "Is India Still a Democracy? The Answer Isn't So Clear," *Wall Street Journal*, April 15, 2021 ~ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/is-india-still-a-democracy-the-answer-isnt-so-clear-11618525073>.

<sup>21</sup> Alizada et. al., "Autocratization Turns Viral," 21.

<sup>22</sup> "Freedom in the World 2021: India," section D1.

<sup>23</sup> Reporters Without Borders, "India" ~ <https://rsf.org/en/india>.

Court itself observed that the use of such laws could “muzzle media freedom” and declared, “It is time we define the limits of sedition.”<sup>24</sup>

India’s civil society organizations also face an increasingly repressive state. Numerous activists involved in protests against Modi government policies have been charged with sedition or targeted by the 1967 Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, a law originally intended for use against anti-state terrorists.<sup>25</sup> University professors and students have been arrested and prosecuted for their criticism of government policies, especially the Citizenship Amendment Act, the 2019 law passed by the BJP that pointedly excluded Muslims from a list of persecuted minorities eligible for gaining Indian citizenship and that is perceived by critics as part of a broader scheme to deny Muslims equal status in India.<sup>26</sup> As the U.S.-based network of academic institutions Scholars at Risk reported in 2020, “over the past two years, an apparent surge in incidents...alongside heightened nationalistic rhetoric by Prime Minister Modi underscore fears that the space for ideas and dialogue in India is being constricted, and dissent punished.”<sup>27</sup>

Indian government authorities had taken steps to circumscribe the activities of NGOs before Modi’s rise to national power in 2014, but his government quickly took full advantage of amendments to India’s Foreign Contribution Regulatory Act to cancel the operating licenses—and thus effectively silence—20,000 NGOs from 2014 to 2018.<sup>28</sup> The Modi government tightened restrictions on foreign funding for NGOs, which led, for instance, to the September 2020 closure of Amnesty International’s operations in India after the group released a series of critical reports.<sup>29</sup> Amnesty International’s

<sup>24</sup> “Time to Define Limits of Sedition; Particularly in Context of Media Freedom: SC,” *Wire*, May 31, 2021 ~ <https://thewire.in/law/supreme-court-sedition-media-freedom-chandrachud-telugu-channel>.

<sup>25</sup> Sumit Ganguly, “India’s Democracy Is Under Threat,” *Foreign Policy*, September 18, 2020 ~ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/18/indias-democracy-is-under-threat>.

<sup>26</sup> Harrison Akins, “The Citizenship (Amendment) Act in India,” U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Legislation Factsheet, February 2020 ~ [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Legislation%20Factsheet%20-%20India\\_0.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Legislation%20Factsheet%20-%20India_0.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Scholars at Risk, “Free to Think,” November 2020, 55 ~ <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Scholars-at-Risk-Free-to-Think-2020.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Daya Bhattacharya, “FCRA Licenses of 20,000 NGOs Cancelled: Act Being Used as Weapon to Silence Organisations,” *Firstpost*, December 30, 2016 ~ <https://www.firstpost.com/india/fcra-licenses-of-20000-ngos-cancelled-act-being-used-as-weapon-to-silence-organisations-3181560.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Niha Masih, “Amnesty International to Cease Work in India, Citing Government Harassment,” *Washington Post*, September 29, 2020 ~ [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/india-amnesty-international-harassment/2020/09/29/62ad452c-01bd-11eb-b92e-029676f9ebec\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/india-amnesty-international-harassment/2020/09/29/62ad452c-01bd-11eb-b92e-029676f9ebec_story.html). Sumit Ganguly has likewise explained how the Ford Foundation froze its spending in India due to government pressure. See Sumit Ganguly, “The Death of Human Rights in India?” *Foreign Policy*, October 2, 2020 ~ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/02/the-death-of-human-rights-in-india>.

acting secretary general stated that the government's aim was to "silence critical voices and stoke a climate of fear."<sup>30</sup>

The impact of the Modi government's Hindu nationalist ideology—and especially its implications for Indian minority groups—is most pronounced in the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index. From 2014 to 2020, India's global ranking fell from 27th place to 53rd. The report explained that the "increasing influence of religion under the Modi premiership, whose policies have fomented anti-Muslim feeling and religious strife, has damaged the political fabric of the country."<sup>31</sup> As evidence of anti-Muslim discrimination, the report cites the Citizenship Amendment Act, along with the state's efforts to suppress national protests against that act. Raising similar concerns, in 2021 the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom concluded that India's government was "engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations" and identified the Citizenship Amendment Act, along with mob violence in New Delhi in February 2020 that mainly targeted Muslims and the "weaponization of citizenship laws" such as the proposed national register of citizens, as supporting evidence.<sup>32</sup> The national register of citizens was originally intended to be a list of all Indian citizens, but the state implemented rules for proving citizenship that have disproportionately disenfranchised Muslims in the northeast state of Assam and have already rendered nearly two million people effectively stateless and at risk of internment and deportation.<sup>33</sup>

In sum, there is overwhelming evidence that the Modi government has taken steps to curtail civil liberties, stifle criticism, and target domestic opponents in ways that fail to protect minorities, privilege majoritarian rule, and suggest the potential for a more general deterioration in the quality of India's democracy. This pattern is fairly consistent with the findings of Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, who have observed that, with the exception of outright coups d'état, states do not transform from liberal democracies to authoritarian autocracies overnight. Rather, "more often... democracies erode

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<sup>30</sup> Amnesty International, "Amnesty International India Halts Its Work on Upholding Human Rights in India Due to Reprisal from Government of India," Press Release, September 29, 2020 ~ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/09/amnesty-international-india-halts-its-work-on-upholding-human-rights-in-india-due-to-reprisal-from-government-of-india>.

<sup>31</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, "Democracy Index 2020."

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Annual Report 2021," April 2021, 22 ~ <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/India%20Chapter%20AR2021.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> Suhasini Raj and Jeffrey Gettleman, "A Mass Citizenship Check in India Leaves 2 Million People in Limbo," *New York Times*, August 31, 2019 ~ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/31/world/asia/india-muslim-citizen-list.html>.

slowly, in barely visible steps.”<sup>34</sup> Moreover, “for many citizens, it may, at first, be imperceptible. After all, elections continue to be held. Opposition politicians still sit in congress. Independent newspapers continue to circulate.”<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, many important aspects of India’s democracy still function, and perhaps they always will. Freedom House continues to rate India’s election process as free and fair, and it is clear that the BJP cannot dictate outcomes, especially at the state level where it often faces stiff competition.<sup>36</sup> In the spring of 2021, for instance, the BJP lost several state-level elections, including a hotly contested race in West Bengal in which Modi had delivered dozens of speeches before huge rallies and even appeared to have grown his beard in the style of the state’s beloved poet Rabindranath Tagore to appeal to voters.<sup>37</sup> Because India’s decentralized federal structure often leaves considerable power in the hands of a wide variety of regionally rooted parties, the sprawling and diverse nation has historically experienced more raucous ungovernability than consolidated autocracy. One way to think about India’s national politics is that the BJP wins the center owing to a lack of any strong alternative—a gap left by the relative collapse of the long-dominant Indian National Congress party and by the inability of regional parties to mount a collective challenge.

Given these realities, it is less than clear that the Modi government has fully captured India’s electoral institutions or distorted its procedures. There are, to be sure, important reasons for concern, not least the state’s apparent use of Israeli-made spyware against opposition politicians and an election commissioner.<sup>38</sup> And there have been some worrisome signs of politicization in India’s judiciary as well.<sup>39</sup> Still, the Supreme Court continues to take independent positions. For example, it plans to review the sedition laws

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<sup>34</sup> Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2019), 3. Of course, Levitsky and Ziblatt draw from a far wider literature and cite Juan Linz’s 1978 *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* as seminal.

<sup>35</sup> Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 77.

<sup>36</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2021: India.”

<sup>37</sup> Pallavi Ghosh, “BJP Sees Reflection of Tagore in PM Modi’s New Look, Says Gurudev’s Values to Guide Policies in Bengal,” *News 18*, January 19, 2021 ≈ <https://www.news18.com/news/politics/beard-trap-more-than-modis-look-bjp-will-rely-on-tagores-essence-in-policies-to-woo-bengal-3310901.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Shoab Daniyal, “Supreme Court, EC, Opposition: Spyware Attack Threatens Pillars of India’s Electoral Democracy,” *Scroll.in*, July 2021 ≈ <https://scroll.in/article/1000604/supreme-court-ec-opposition-spyware-attack-threatens-pillars-of-indias-electoral-democracy>. Note also that although the V-Dem rankings specifically raise concerns about the autonomy of the Election Commission of India, Freedom House continued to give high marks to India’s electoral process. See Alizada et al., “Autocratization Turns Viral,” 20; and Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2021: India.”

<sup>39</sup> Rana Ayyub, “The Destruction of India’s Judicial Independence Is Almost Complete,” *Washington Post*, March 24, 2020 ≈ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/03/24/destruction-indias-judicial-independence-is-almost-complete>.

noted above, and in July 2021 it declared a paid vaccination scheme advanced by the Modi government to be “prima facie, arbitrary and irrational.”<sup>40</sup> Freedom House has observed that “judges, particularly at the Supreme Court level, have displayed autonomy and activism in response to public-interest litigation.”<sup>41</sup> To the extent that individual or lower-level judges and courts have been susceptible to political influence, it is not obvious that conditions are materially worse than under past governments. India’s judiciary is down but not yet out.

In short, important “antibodies” to autocracy remain in India, even if pillars of democracy are being tested. Although Modi and the BJP may eventually establish a permanent hold on power, as Levitsky and Ziblatt put it, they have not yet fully captured India’s referees, bought or enfeebled their opponents, or rewritten the rules of the political game.<sup>42</sup>

Turning from a focus on political institutions to a look at political culture and ideology, India’s BJP-led government brings a strikingly different outlook from its Congress Party predecessor. Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva, defines the BJP’s identity, as both Modi and his party are direct products of the hardcore Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh organization.<sup>43</sup> That said, at least as important for understanding India’s national political identity are the limits to which it could ever have been adequately described as “liberal” in the standard Western sense.<sup>44</sup> This is true for understanding India’s often tradition-bound social norms, and it is helpful for understanding Indian economic policies, where “powerful nationalist ideas of self-reliance and particular views of sovereignty... have made economic reforms a particularly contentious arena.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> On the court’s review of sedition laws, see Krishnadas Rajagopal, “Why Do You Need the ‘Colonial Law’ of Sedition after 75 Years of Independence, CJI Asks Govt,” *Hindu*, July 15, 2021 ∼ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/is-this-law-necessary-sc-seeks-centres-response-on-pleas-challenging-sedition-law/article35336402.ece>. On the court’s challenge to government vaccine policies, see Rohan Venkataramakrishnan, “The Political Fix: Will Pressure from the Supreme Court and States Prompt a Modi U-Turn on Vaccines?” *Scroll.in*, June 7, 2021 ∼ <https://scroll.in/article/996712/the-political-fix-will-pressure-from-the-supreme-court-and-states-prompt-a-modi-u-turn-on-vaccines>.

<sup>41</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2021: India.”

<sup>42</sup> Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 92.

<sup>43</sup> On the BJP and RSS, see Walter K. Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron* (Gurgaron: Random House, 2019); Walter K. Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle, *RSS: A View to the Inside* (Gurgaron: Random House, 2019); and Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

<sup>44</sup> For brief but insightful observations on this point, see Akhilesh Pillalamarri, “Why India’s Democracy Is Not Dying,” *Diplomat*, June 14, 2021 ∼ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/why-indias-democracy-is-not-dying>; and Akhilesh Pillalamarri, “A Changing India: Caught Between Illiberalism and Social Revolution,” *Diplomat*, August 18, 2019 ∼ <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/a-changing-india-caught-between-illiberalism-and-social-revolution>.

<sup>45</sup> Alyssa Ayres, *Our Time Has Come* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 109.

Yet as Foreign Minister Jaishankar argues in his 2020 book *The India Way*, characterizing India's worldview by reference to Western terms like "liberal democracy" delivers an incomplete, impoverished perspective.<sup>46</sup>

Jaishankar's views are especially instructive because of his important foreign policy role in the Modi government. For him, India's liberalism, pluralism, and democratic practices find fertile soil in India because they are compatible with underlying cultural and civilizational attributes of far more ancient provenance.<sup>47</sup> When it comes to explaining what kind of great power India is likely to become, he turns first to an exploration of India's own history and traditions, and writes that "if there are today hurdles to understanding India's viewpoint, much of that arises from an ignorance of its thought processes. This is hardly surprising when much of the West was historically so dismissive of our society."<sup>48</sup> Jaishankar argues that the *Mahabharata*, the ancient Sanskrit epic poem, is an especially rich resource for understanding and interpreting India.

One need not accept Jaishankar's specific applications of poetic wisdom to contemporary policy challenges in order to spot his skepticism about Western ideologies like liberalism. Indeed, he tends to characterize liberalism and other Western beliefs as mere "narratives" rather than universal ideals, and he repeatedly points out how they have been applied hypocritically by the United States and its other Western partners.<sup>49</sup> In his critique of the United States, Jaishankar is not alone; generations of Indian diplomats have frequently (although not universally) taken a dim view of U.S. policies. Although most have adopted a leftist idiom in their critiques, few could be considered "liberal" in outlook. In the wide and diverse spectrum of Indian worldviews, liberalism is present but by no means dominant or defining.<sup>50</sup> Jaishankar is right when he explains that the principles and logic that undergird the practice of politics in India are not the same as those elsewhere, even if they may be compatible.

In sum, U.S. policymakers, including those in the Biden administration, should see India not as a liberal democracy identical to the U.S. model but as a democracy built on distinct cultural, historical, and intellectual foundations.

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<sup>46</sup> S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for An Uncertain World* (Noida: HarperCollins, 2020).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 128, 212.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 63–64, 119–20.

<sup>50</sup> In one important effort to catalogue Indian worldviews, India's "liberal globalists" are a relatively small minority, distinct from India's many nationalists and leftists for having a solidly pro-U.S./Western perspective. See Deepa M. Ollapally and Rajesh Rajagopalan, "India," in *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: Domestic Foreign Policy Debates in China, India, Iran, Japan and Russia*, ed. Henry R. Nau and Deepa M. Ollapally (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), figure 3.2.

To the extent that India's democratic institutions and practices are being eroded by the Modi government, the distance between Washington's "ideal of India" and India's reality appears to be growing wider. The next question is precisely how that is likely to matter for India's international relations.

#### PATHWAYS FROM INDIAN DOMESTIC POLITICS TO INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Not all international relations theorists—or policymakers—see a clear-cut connection between a state's domestic political institutions and its international relationships. However, rather than taking sides in a theoretical debate over the drivers of state action in the international system, this article simply considers a range of different pathways by which changes in India's domestic politics could plausibly alter the character of its foreign affairs. Four pathways are discussed in turn: how India's domestic politics (1) influence India's international aims, (2) shape India's policy processes, (3) contribute to India's hard-power capabilities, and (4) alter the perceptions and politics of other states.

##### *Pathway 1: Aims*

For U.S. liberal internationalists, including the influential members of the Biden administration cited earlier in this article, it is axiomatic that a state's domestic politics will influence its international aims. Put another way, a state's international preferences are largely (but not exclusively) the aggregated product of its subnational identities, values, interests, and institutional structures.<sup>51</sup> By this logic, liberal democracies by their nature will tend to pursue different international aims than illiberal autocracies. Liberal democracies should have, for example, an interest in defending the liberal international order and its institutions, practices, and norms. Precisely how liberal states will advance that agenda could vary widely, but even when they disagree among themselves, their common practices, expectations, and agreements will keep them from resorting to war with each other.<sup>52</sup> No such obstacle bars liberal democracies from war with illiberal, autocratic states. To the contrary, their divergent practices at home amplify their differences in

<sup>51</sup> Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 513–53.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Doyle is seminal on liberalism, foreign policy, and the democratic peace concept, but the literature has seen contributions from many other scholars over the subsequent decades. Michael Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (1983): 205–35.

the international context and increase the likelihood that they will end up in armed conflict.<sup>53</sup>

If these basic assumptions are accurate, an illiberal India would presumably be a less dependable partner for the United States, less invested in the defense of the prevailing international order, and—if taken to the extreme—more likely to resolve its differences with other liberal democracies through war. As noted above in the discussion of Jaishankar’s work, India’s current leaders perceive their worldview as only partly and inadequately described by reference to liberal ideals. Ian Hall has argued persuasively that Modi has sought to ground India’s dealings with other states in the language and logic of Hindu nationalist ideology.<sup>54</sup> Whether Modi has yet succeeded in transforming India’s foreign policy to reflect his religiously rooted ideals is debatable.<sup>55</sup> Less debatable is the observation that India’s foreign policy under Modi is unlikely to reflect strong liberal impulses or aspirations, and in this respect he has much in common with his predecessors. As observed above, liberalism has never been India’s dominant political ideology.

Accordingly, when India’s aims do align with those of liberal democracies, or when they run counter to illiberal autocracies, the causes of alignment or contradiction are unlikely to be found by looking to India’s liberal identity, as that search will come up dry. This basic point helps to illuminate, for instance, the Cold War pattern of strategic disagreements between Washington and New Delhi that often distinguished India from the liberal democracies of the West with respect to international alignments, free-trade regimes, and other issues of global order. Today, it may help explain why India’s economy still has not opened as much as some of its Asian peers, why “suspicion of commerce and especially foreign capital has remained a consistent feature of domestic conversation,” why India “does not project itself as an activist for the liberal democratic order,” and why India bristles at the prospect of formal alliance with the United States, as Alyssa Ayres points out in *Our Time Has Come*.<sup>56</sup> In sum, it should give fair warning to those who assume the India of the present—or future—will situate liberal aims at the core of the country’s global aspirations.

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<sup>53</sup> Michael Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part 2,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12, no. 4 (1983): 323–53.

<sup>54</sup> Ian Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019), 10.

<sup>55</sup> For an earlier scholarly debate over the trajectory of Modi’s policy, see Rajesh Basrur, “Modi’s Foreign Policy Fundamentals: A Trajectory Unchanged,” *International Affairs* 93, no. 1 (2017): 7–26. ~ <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/93/1/7/2731383>.

<sup>56</sup> Ayres, *Our Time Has Come*, 45, 153, 216, 228–29.



## *Pathway 2: Policy Processes*

The means of seeking and retaining political power are fundamentally different in democracies and autocracies, and those variations also translate into different foreign policy processes. Nailing down the ways in which regime type systematically affects international relations outcomes has occupied several generations of modern international relations scholars. Over time, many have narrowed their focus to the specific issue of how democracies tend to experience and respond to the pressures of public sentiment—or “audience costs”—differently from their autocratic counterparts.<sup>57</sup> Put simply, democratic leaders who owe their political power to popular consent are relatively more constrained by their publics, while autocrats enjoy a freer hand. Each regime type thus holds distinct advantages and disadvantages. Democratic leaders are expected to be more sensitive to the political costs associated with risky or norm-breaking foreign policies, such as unpopular wars, but would also be more likely to deliver credible threats to adversaries and be more trusted by allies to keep promises they make publicly. Autocrats, on the other hand, would be more insulated from public pressure, and thus more willing to undertake foreign adventures and bluffing to achieve tactical advantage, but also less able to deliver effective, credible signals of their intentions to friends or foes.<sup>58</sup>

For citizens in a democracy to hold their leaders accountable, they must have sufficient information to assess policy outcomes and sufficient power to reward the good and punish the bad. Accordingly, a free press and opposition parties are essential prerequisites for democratic accountability.<sup>59</sup> Other things being equal, a state with a freer media environment and more competitive opposition politics is expected to be better at constraining the foreign policy decisions of its leaders.<sup>60</sup>

As discussed earlier in this article, India is now experiencing democratic erosion in areas that would appear to have a direct bearing on accountability in its foreign policy. Tightened controls over the media reduce the quality of

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<sup>57</sup> For the best recent review of this literature on the link between regime type and international relations, see Susan Hyde and Elizabeth Saunders, “Recapturing Regime Type in International Relations: Leaders, Institutions, and Agency Space,” *International Organization* 74, no. 2 (2020): 363–95.

<sup>58</sup> Kenneth Schultz set up the basic framework for this argument. See Kenneth Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>59</sup> Matthew Baum and Philip Potter, *War and Democratic Restraint* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>60</sup> Of course, other things may not be equal. For an effort to grapple with additional factors, like the salience of foreign policy issues and the clarity of how decisions are actually made (and who is making them), see Vipin Narang and Paul Staniland, “Democratic Accountability and Foreign Security Policy: Theory and Evidence from India,” *Security Studies* 27, no. 3 (2018): 410–47.

information and, consequently, the public's ability to assess the government's foreign policy decisions. State repression of civil society organizations, independent scholars, activists, and opposition politicians narrows the opportunity for dissent and competitive politics, reducing the public's power to reward or punish the government.

Recent scholarship on regime type in international relations treats "democracy" and "autocracy" as points along a spectrum, and it is important to recognize that individual democracies may be more or less constrained by audience costs.<sup>61</sup> When compared to many other democratic states, India's prime ministers have enjoyed a relatively great deal of latitude on foreign policy matters. Since independence, foreign policymaking has been centralized in the office of the prime minister and the Ministry of External Affairs, and it has rarely been a main focus of India's national elections.<sup>62</sup> That said, if the conduct of Indian foreign policy is further insulated from democratic accountability as current trends—especially tightened constraints on the media—suggest, India's international relations become functionally indistinguishable from those of an autocracy.

In concrete terms, because India's foreign policy is not democratically accountable, it is less transparent—both to Indians and the rest of the world—and harder to anticipate. That opens the door to actions that are more idiosyncratic and changeable based on the personality and aims of India's leadership, especially when power is centralized in the hands of a charismatic leader like Modi. The opacity and personalized quality of India's policy process under such a leader introduces a greater likelihood of miscalculation by adversaries such as China or Pakistan as well as by partners such as the United States, even as it frees New Delhi to pursue a wider range of tactically advantageous goals. India should enjoy greater capacity for surprise but less for reassurance. To be clear, these developments need not necessarily result in uniformly better or worse foreign policy outcomes (at least from an Indian perspective), but they are likely to be consequentially different from what a more democratic India would deliver.

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<sup>61</sup> As Susan Hyde and Elisabeth Saunders have explained, recent waves of research on regime type added a great deal more nuance and complexity to the field, among other things by raising questions about how democrats and autocrats can try to manipulate audience costs as a means to achieve similar international advantages. Still, they conclude that such manipulation is not cost-free, and that, on balance, "regime type provides important structural constraints and bounds on state leaders and the degree to which political elites can strategically manipulate these constraints." Hyde and Saunders, "Recapturing Regime Type in International Relations," 387.

<sup>62</sup> Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, 11–12; and Narang and Staniland, "Democratic Accountability and Foreign Security Policy," 427–29.

### *Pathway 3: Hard Power*

Above all, India's prominence in contemporary geopolitics is a consequence of its huge population and the potential economic, political, and military weight that over one-sixth of humanity will have on the world stage. For many international strategists, especially self-identifying "realists," the core issue is not whether India is more or less liberal or democratic but whether it manages to translate that population advantage into hard power. But these issues are interconnected to the extent that the character of India's domestic policies and governance determines a great deal about its hard-power capabilities.

Precisely how to draw these connections is less certain. The dominant post-Cold War consensus that assumed causal linkages between liberal democratic governance, economic development, rising wealth, and greater hard-power capabilities is increasingly contested.<sup>63</sup> In India, where socialist economic policies gave way to market reforms in 1991 because of a crippling currency crisis rather than a broad-based intellectual conversion to liberal principles, there has been "diminishing enthusiasm" for continued market reforms over subsequent decades.<sup>64</sup> In addition, the rise of China has sharpened a global debate over the causal relationship between political regime type and economic development. China's version of authoritarian capitalism is touted as a model by those (especially in Beijing, but in many other illiberal regimes as well) who believe that high growth is achievable in autocratic states.<sup>65</sup> Some go further, suggesting that state repression delivers the political stability necessary for growth in otherwise too fractious and divided societies.<sup>66</sup>

For India, one way to frame the question is to ask whether a further erosion of democracy is likely to serve any developmentally beneficial purpose. It is at least conceivable that the Modi government's constraints

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<sup>63</sup> Timothy Stanley and Alexander Lee, "It's Still Not the End of History," *Atlantic*, September 1, 2014 ~ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/09/its-still-not-the-end-of-history-francis-fukuyama/379394>.

<sup>64</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, "Introduction," in *Getting India Back on Track: An Action Agenda*, ed. Bibek Debroy, Ashley J. Tellis, and Reece Trevor (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014), 16.

<sup>65</sup> One Western take on the benefits of the "China model" is found in Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). For an example of how the China model is discussed in other societies, see Ofir Winter and Doron Ella, "The Chinese Development Model: A Cure for Egyptian Woes?" Institute for National Security Studies, INSS Insight, no. 1203, August 21, 2019 ~ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19499>.

<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth C. Economy, "Yes, Virginia, China Is Exporting Its Model," Council on Foreign Relations, December 11, 2019 ~ <https://www.cfr.org/blog/yes-virginia-china-exporting-its-model>.

on the media, civil society, and opposition groups would create space for policies that spur the economy and, in turn, more successfully harness the latent power of India's population to international purpose. In a contentious democracy, local political activism can paralyze business and stymie supporting investments, including for vital infrastructure. As chief minister of the state of Gujarat, Modi gained fame for winning new investment by significantly easing the path for businesses, as when in 2008 he lured Tata Motors to relocate a high-profile factory that had been delayed by land protests in the state of West Bengal.<sup>67</sup> The desperate desire for greater efficiency in India, sometimes at a cost to local interest groups, is hardly unique to Modi. Indeed, the very sedition laws now used by the current government to stifle criticism were also deployed by the previous government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to put down protests against a new nuclear power plant that the government considered essential to meeting India's energy needs.<sup>68</sup>

However, as Christophe Jaffrelot, Atul Kohli, and Kanta Murali have argued, a careful review of Modi's record shows that his policies are more accurately characterized as "pro-business" than as "pro-development."<sup>69</sup> Although conceivably such an approach could eventually deliver high growth and broad-based development, in India it has mainly delivered "growing inequalities and a failure to spread the benefits of development widely."<sup>70</sup> Moreover, Jaffrelot, Kohli, and Murali perceive that pro-business policies in India tend to beget a vicious cycle in which politicians cater to narrow interests, struggle to win the support of other excluded groups, and increasingly depend on tools of political repression to keep the game going. The net result is likely to be less democracy, less economic development, and—over time—an India with relatively less hard power.

Exclusionary or discriminatory policies, especially those that have the potential to alienate important segments of the Indian population such as its Muslim community, could also diminish India's hard-power potential in at least three ways. First, they will reduce the productive capacity of a

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<sup>67</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, "How Narendra Modi Brought Industrialists to Gujarat (and Cut Many Corners in the Process)," *Scroll.in*, January 4, 2019 ~ <https://scroll.in/article/907850/how-narendra-modi-brought-industrialists-to-gujarat-and-cut-many-corners-in-the-process>.

<sup>68</sup> Maneesh Chhibber, "Why BJP and Congress Love to Hate Sedition (Till They Come to Power)," *Print*, January 21, 2019 ~ <https://theprint.in/opinion/why-bjp-and-congress-love-to-hate-sedition-till-they-come-to-power/180648>.

<sup>69</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, Atul Kohli, and Kanta Murali, *Business and Politics in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

significant part of India's society by denying it equal opportunity, legal protection, and a sense of shared national purpose. Though a minority in India, the country's Muslim community is the world's third largest at over 200 million. Second, repression of increasingly violent dissent will impose mounting security costs on the Indian state. Whatever costs the state must pay to maintain domestic order—by paramilitary forces, the police, or otherwise—are resources unavailable for other productive uses. These costs appear to have been manageable to date but would rise if communal tensions worsen. For instance, in 2019, publicly reported policing costs in Jammu and Kashmir doubled after the Modi government preemptively imposed a heavy security presence to detain activists and quell any violent protest against its decision to revoke the state's special semi-autonomous constitutional status that had been defined by Article 370 of the Indian constitution.<sup>71</sup> Third, large-scale demonstrations destroy lives and property, harming the economy and reducing state tax revenues. New Delhi's 2020 communal riots were the worst in decades and reportedly destroyed over \$3 billion in property.<sup>72</sup> Four months of state-imposed lockdown in Jammu and Kashmir cost an estimated \$2 billion in lost GDP.<sup>73</sup>

Ultimately, when it comes to international relations, the hard-power resources of a state must be measured in net, rather than gross, terms.<sup>74</sup> If an increasing share of India's GDP is devoted to repressing domestic dissent, destroyed by the violence of Hindu nationalist politics, or diminished by the disenfranchisement and exclusion of the Muslim minority, the state will have a smaller slice of a slower-growing economic pie to devote to foreign affairs and national security. For ambitious Indian strategists seeking ways to tighten the yawning power differential in the competition between India and China, these handicaps could prove especially damaging.

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<sup>71</sup> During FY 2019–20, India spent Rs 1,267 crore (\$179.9 million) on security in Jammu and Kashmir, compared to Rs 650 crore (approximately \$92.9 million) in FY 2018–19. See "Security Expenditure In J&K All Time High," *Kashmir Observer*, February 2, 2021  $\approx$  <https://kashmirobsobserver.net/2021/02/02/security-expenditure-in-jk-all-time-high>.

<sup>72</sup> "Rs 25,000 Crore Loss Estimated in Delhi Riots," DNA India, March 1, 2020  $\approx$  <https://www.dnaindia.com/business/report-rs-25000-crore-loss-estimated-in-delhi-riots-2815581>.

<sup>73</sup> "Kashmir Economy Suffered Loss of Rs 17,878 Cr in 4 Months after Article 370 Abrogation," *Indian Express*, December 17, 2019  $\approx$  <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/kashmir-economy-suffered-loss-four-months-after-article-370-abrogation-jk-6172096>.

<sup>74</sup> Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 12.

### *Pathway 4: Foreign Perceptions*

India's position in regional and global affairs is partly defined by hard measures of economic and military capability but also by the perceptions of other states. India enjoys great cultural and popular appeal worldwide, and much about its soft power is derived from civilizational, religious, and historical wellsprings, not to mention Bollywood and an exceptionally vibrant arts and literature scene. Yet it has also been argued that an important part of India's global appeal is its democratic identity. That other states have viewed India differently—and often with admiration on this count—influences their expectations of India and even their policy responses to New Delhi.

The power of India's example—a huge, diverse, developing country that is also the world's largest democracy—has held significant appeal beyond its borders, including in India's neighborhood. Sushant Singh found, for instance, that Nepal emulated India in formulating its constitution and that India has used the power of its democratic, pluralistic policies to encourage greater protection of minority rights in Sri Lanka.<sup>75</sup> When India's policies disadvantage Muslims or other minority groups, perceptions of India suffer in Bangladesh and suspicions are confirmed in Pakistan. The consequences are strategically significant: Singh warns that when India's neighbors stop viewing the country as a pluralistic democracy, New Delhi will have one less card to play in a contest for regional influence. China may also lack soft-power appeal, but it enjoys deeper pockets and is poised take advantage of the many opportunities afforded by sheer financial heft in South Asia.

Whereas India's huge Muslim population could conceivably serve as a natural bridge-building opportunity for New Delhi to facilitate closer relations with Muslim-majority states around the world, an increasingly majoritarian, Hindutva India is more likely to find itself at odds—or at least struggling to manage relations—with the rest of the Muslim world. At the very least, India misses an opportunity to score diplomatic points against its regional adversary Pakistan, a state nominally created as a homeland for South Asia's Muslims that would be denied that animating purpose if India proved itself equally welcoming. India also loses considerable standing to criticize China's own brutal repression of its Muslim minority, a self-inflicted setback in the contest for regional and international influence.

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<sup>75</sup> Sushant Singh, "Modi Government's Approach towards India's Smaller Neighbours Is Pushing Them Closer to China," Scroll.in, June 21, 2021 ~ <https://scroll.in/article/998006/modi-governments-approach-towards-indias-smaller-neighbours-is-pushing-them-closer-to-china>.

As noted in earlier sections, for the United States and other liberal democracies, perceptions of India's democratic credentials have been central to the priority placed on improving strategic ties over the past twenty years. These perceptions are hardly new or unique to the Biden administration. Since at least the George W. Bush administration, India has been characterized as the “not-China” in Asia: a competing model for politics and development that tips the scales, at least in terms of world population, between greater autocracy and greater democracy.

Perhaps the best evidence of how India's democratic credentials have affected U.S. policy was on display when President Bush accelerated efforts to deepen ties with India and pushed the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement through Congress at the end of his term. Throughout the process, top U.S. officials publicly justified a policy that broke with decades of U.S. nonproliferation law and practice by stressing India's exceptional democratic identity. For instance, Ashley Tellis, who as senior adviser to the undersecretary of state for political affairs played a central role in formulating and advancing the policy, explained in congressional testimony in 2005 that “strengthening New Delhi and transforming U.S.-Indian ties...has everything to do with American confidence in Indian democracy and the conviction that its growing strength, tempered by its liberal values, brings only benefits for Asian stability and American security.”<sup>76</sup> The 2006 legislation endorsing the principle of U.S.-India nuclear cooperation specifically listed India's “functioning and uninterrupted democratic system of government” as a top justification for that cooperation (immediately after its “responsible behavior” on nuclear nonproliferation).<sup>77</sup> In 2008, Senator John Kerry explained that he had voted for the 2006 legislation “because, as you have said here today and others have said, I viewed this as a very important way to strengthen the partnership between the world's oldest and largest democracies.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, “The U.S.-India ‘Global Partnership’: How Significant for American Interests?” testimony before the House Committee on International Relations, Washington, D.C., November 17, 2005 ∼ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2005/11/17/u.s.-india-global-partnership-how-significant-for-american-interests-pub-17693>. Similar points were made by other top Bush administration officials. See Condoleezza Rice (speech, Washington, D.C., April 14, 2005) ∼ <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/44662.htm>; and R. Nicholas Burns, “The U.S. and India: The New Strategic Partnership” (speech to the Asia Society, New York, October 18, 2005) ∼ <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/us/rm/2005/55269.htm>.

<sup>77</sup> *United States and India Nuclear Cooperation*, Public Law No. 109–401, Stat. 2726, 109th Cong., December 18, 2006 ∼ <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-109publ401/html/PLAW-109publ401.htm>.

<sup>78</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Agreement for Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation with India*, 110 Cong. 2nd Sess., September 18, 2008 ∼ <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-110shrg46951/html/CHRG-110shrg46951.htm>.

To be clear, the argument here is not that Washington exclusively pursues strategic partnerships with other liberal democracies. It does not. Nor can it be said that U.S. strategists cultivated ties with India merely because of its democratic credentials. However, the politics of cooperation with India appear to have been eased in important ways by positive U.S. perceptions of its democratic political identity. Time and again, the U.S. political debate on India has referenced the power of India's ideals and institutions to open the way for a wider political coalition in favor of U.S. ties than would be the case for strategic partnership founded on calculations of material interest alone. When India's democratic credentials are in doubt, the politics of granting it exceptional status—for instance, on a waiver of sanctions for arms purchases from Russia—will become more challenging.<sup>79</sup>

#### IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

India's democratic institutions have been weakened in important ways and face significant threat of further erosion. Moreover, India's political culture has only ever been partly and inadequately defined by liberalism. The tangible implications of this reality are felt, first and foremost, by Indian citizens. However, because of its vast population and growing capacity for action beyond its borders, what happens inside India will have inevitable consequence for the rest of the world as well. Indian domestic political ideals and institutions inform its global aims and aspirations, influence its patterns of foreign policymaking, increase or diminish its hard-power resources, and make it more (or less) attractive to other members of the international system.

For the United States, the long-term value of partnership with an illiberal, undemocratic India would be less than what the Biden administration—or most of its recent predecessors—has hoped. If present trends persist—and they might not—Washington will find India a relatively less committed, less capable partner, especially when it comes to defending the institutions and norms of the liberal world order.

U.S. policymakers should also recognize that if India's leaders feel less constrained by a free press and domestic audience costs, they may be more willing to run risks for tactical and political advantage, including in India's violent border conflicts with Pakistan and, increasingly, with China. The Modi

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<sup>79</sup> On the congressional politics of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), see Todd Young, "Sanctioning India Would Spoil the Quad," *Foreign Policy*, April 12, 2021 ↗ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/12/united-states-india-quad-china-russia-s-400-caasta-waiver-biden-modi>.



government's public mischaracterizations of the February 2019 Balakot airstrike and subsequent air skirmishes, including subsequently debunked claims of a destroyed terrorist camp inside Pakistan and India's downing of a Pakistani F-16 jet, have already raised questions in the United States about New Delhi's credibility and communications strategy in the midst of an exceptionally dangerous regional context.<sup>80</sup> A more democratically accountable India would continue to enjoy the benefit of the doubt in Washington, in part because its erroneous claims would more likely be investigated and debated by a free Indian press.

This is not an argument against Washington's strategic cooperation with New Delhi, as there will undoubtedly be areas of common interest just as the United States finds with a significant number of the world's autocratic states. Even an illiberal, undemocratic India could, for instance, be a helpful member in a coalition devoted to strategic competition with China, but it would do so for different reasons than if it were a liberal democracy. The United States should not "punish" India for its domestic political practices any more than it does other states with which Washington eagerly seeks closer ties as a means to advance its strategic aims, like Vietnam.

Moreover, because India retains important democratic features, including the world's largest elections, there is no reason for U.S. officials to declare otherwise. To the contrary, there would be clear and counterproductive diplomatic costs to amplifying public criticism of the Modi government. That said, the Biden administration's early embrace of India bilaterally and in the Quad—along with treaty allies Japan and Australia—runs the risk of hypocrisy if it emphasizes India's democratic credentials and uncritically accepts the Modi government's narrative.<sup>81</sup> Blinken walked a fine line during his July 2021 visit to New Delhi, observing that all democracies are imperfect "works in progress" and stressing the depth of shared democratic values between the United States and India.<sup>82</sup> Blinken's emphasis on democratic aspirations

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<sup>80</sup> Sameer Lalwani and Emily Tallo, "Did India Shoot Down a Pakistani F-16 in February? This Just Became a Big Deal," *Washington Post*, April 17, 2019 ~ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/04/17/did-india-shoot-down-pakistani-f-back-february-this-just-became-big-deal>.

<sup>81</sup> That narrative was reflected in Modi's speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2021, when he described India as "the mother of all democracies," citing its thousands of years of non-Western democratic tradition and lauding its diverse and vibrant democratic practices. Some critics took issue with this characterization of the history of India's modern democratic system. See, for instance, "PM Modi's Incongruous Speech at the UN," *Deccan Herald*, September 28, 2021 ~ <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/second-edit/pm-modis-incongruous-speech-at-the-un-1035298.html>.

<sup>82</sup> "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar at a Joint Press Availability," U.S. State Department, July 28, 2021 ~ <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-indian-external-affairs-minister-dr-subrahmanyam-jaishankar-at-a-joint-press-availability>.

rather than practices was effective, not least because it nodded to the United States' own experience with domestic threats to democratic practices.

Washington's balancing act will only get more challenging if India's democratic erosion continues. Less adroit U.S. diplomats will risk appearing to be apologists for India's backsliding. One of Biden's offhand comments during his September 2021 bilateral meeting with Modi showed how even small gaffes can lead to trouble. Sitting alongside Modi in the White House, Biden observed that the Indian media are "better behaved" than their U.S. counterparts. Later, one irate journalist raised the comment with Biden's press secretary Jen Psaki, observing that the "Indian press is ranked 142nd in the world, according to Reporters Without Borders, for press freedoms. How does he say that about the U.S. press compared to the Indian press?" Psaki responded by clarifying the president's specific intent but sidestepped the broader issue of press freedoms in India.<sup>83</sup>

Even Blinken's "imperfect democracy" rhetoric masks important, persistent distinctions between the American liberal tradition and India's own domestic political culture. An illiberal if still democratic India may never strive to achieve the same vision—at home or internationally—as that of the United States. In short, the Biden administration is likely to face a series of increasingly thorny decisions about precisely how to include India in a global vision so clearly defined by the contrast between liberal democracies and other sorts of regimes.

As this challenge unfolds, Washington should also not presume that its courtship of India, or of the Modi government specifically, will have any significant effect on India's domestic political practices. Indian diplomats appreciate the value of speaking about commonalities—including but not limited to democratic values—that resonate with their American counterparts, but such rhetorical maneuvers are unlikely to translate into real changes in the practice of India's domestic politics.<sup>84</sup> India is too big, too complicated, and too inwardly motivated to have its politics driven by an external influence, even that of a superpower like the United States. Washington should accept India's limitations, but the U.S. intelligence community should also closely

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<sup>83</sup> "White House Defends Biden's Remarks Indian Media Is 'Better Behaved' Than U.S. Press," *Times of India*, September 28, 2021 ~ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/white-house-defends-bidens-remarks-indian-media-is-better-behaved-than-us-press/articleshow/86579580.cms>.

<sup>84</sup> As Jaishankar wrote, "When it comes to the U.S., it is noteworthy that India has solidified ties continuously with successive administrations in the recent past. The way forward has been to find a commonality that resonates: with Clinton, it was pluralism and business; with Bush, it was democracy and global strategy; and with Obama, climate change and radicalization. Following Trump's election, it [was] bilateralism, trade and security convergences." Jaishankar, *The India Way*, 124–25.

monitor the domestic political situation, not with the aim of influencing India but with the lesser ambition of anticipating its likely trajectory and informing U.S. policymakers of new developments.

A similar logic applies to the reports on human rights and international religious freedom that are funded and mandated by the U.S. Congress. Although these reports are almost certain to cause irritation in New Delhi—where they are invariably perceived as unfair “drain inspector reports”—and create headaches for U.S. diplomats eager to avoid unpleasant conversations with an important strategic partner, they simultaneously serve a vital purpose by introducing greater transparency into the U.S. policy debate as long as they accurately reflect U.S. values and political assessments.<sup>85</sup> That these reports introduce a degree of discomfort into the bilateral relationship—and perhaps increasingly so if India’s democratic slide worsens—has the benefit of forcing policymakers on both sides to appreciate where their interests are aligned but their ideals are not. U.S. diplomats should use these reports not as a cudgel or point of leverage to change India’s policies, as that is only likely to irritate New Delhi further, but as evidence of the real political headwinds the bilateral relationship will face if present trends hold.<sup>86</sup>

Indeed, if India becomes significantly less democratic at home, Congress will be more likely to take steps to narrow the terms of U.S. cooperation. Senator Menendez’ 2021 letter to Secretary Austin represents, in this context, a possible sign of things to come. Rather than enjoying a broad, bipartisan consensus in favor of building closer ties with India, as it has in the recent past, the White House could need to work harder to insulate what it considers strategically valuable cooperation from undue political pressures, including sanctions.

For a start, the Biden administration should work to head off any congressional legislation structured like the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) that sweeps India into broader sanctions regimes mainly intended to advance other purposes (in this case, to punish Russia, Iran, and North Korea). The U.S. relationship with India is already too important to be held hostage to indirect purposes. Even though the CAATSA has a waiver mechanism that could be used for India, it has introduced

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<sup>85</sup> On the history of India bridleing from U.S. “drain inspector reports,” see Ayres, *Our Time Has Come*, 150.

<sup>86</sup> As Roberta Cohen observed, “the human rights reports remain an important way of establishing an information base and signaling to foreign governments that their practices are under scrutiny and that the evaluation could cost them in political and economic terms.” See Roberta Cohen, “Integrating Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy: The History, the Challenges, and the Criteria for an Effective Policy,” Brookings Institution and University of Bern, 2008 ∞ [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/04\\_human\\_rights\\_cohen.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/04_human_rights_cohen.pdf).

unnecessary drama that could affect relations between New Delhi and Washington for years to come.<sup>87</sup>

As noted above, India's domestic politics are unlikely to be altered by U.S. or other external influences. The same point applies to U.S. sanctions, a blunt policy tool that would almost certainly prove counterproductive in the Indian context. Not only would sanctions fail to force any intended political outcome, but the ensuing acrimony could easily kill cooperation in other areas too. Instead of sanctions or other punitive or coercive measures, the Biden administration would be wise to consider which areas of cooperation and support should simply remain off-limits to an Indian strategic partner whose liberal and democratic bona fides are increasingly called into question.

Some considerations will be relatively straightforward. For instance, transfers of prized U.S. military technologies, such as nuclear propulsion for submarines, are correctly reserved for formal allies, like the United Kingdom and Australia, with whom Washington can expect a future of shared aims that include the defense of liberal values. India is unlikely ever to qualify for such transfers if it stays on its current political trajectory. A similar logic would apply to establishing routines for sharing sensitive intelligence as Washington does with its Five Eyes partners. Still, many other areas of defense cooperation and assistance to advance shared strategic interests should remain open to India, much as they have been for partners such as Saudi Arabia or Egypt, on similarly transactional terms.

Less straightforward will be the U.S. effort to reconsider and adjust cooperation with India on global governance and other nonsecurity issues. For example, the logic of extending U.S. support to India's bid for a permanent seat in a reformed UN Security Council—a precedent-setting move by President Barack Obama in 2010—must be rethought if it begins to gain traction. Washington could still see value in diversifying the membership of that multilateral body but should not assume that India's future votes would reflect aspirations for world order informed by liberalism or democratic principles. Similarly, and more immediately relevant, U.S. diplomats should consider modifying the way they characterize expectations for the newly energized Quad, perhaps by stressing specific points of convergence among its members—such as support for green, high-quality infrastructure investment or open telecommunications standards—rather than continuing to reference a grander set of liberal democratic values.

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<sup>87</sup> Paul McCleary, "Why India's Arms Deals with Russia Are about to Become a Headache for Biden," *Politico*, October 1, 2021 ~ <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/09/30/india-arms-deal-russia-biden-514822>.

In sum, the Biden administration should take care not to assume an easy future of strategic convergence with India, not to overstate India's liberal or democratic credentials, and not to anticipate that U.S. influence—through inducements or coercion—is likely to alter India's political practices at home. That said, neither should the United States forgo all the potential benefits of cooperation with India in the name of defending liberal democratic values. The United States should instead seek a smarter but admittedly more complicated middle ground: cooperating closely with India on areas of common interest without mischaracterizing the nature or logic of either Indian or U.S. aspirations. 

