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How India's democracy shapes its global role and relations with the West

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INDIA

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Summary

- Two narratives dominate global discussions about India today: one is on the country's rise as an increasingly prominent geopolitical and economic actor; the other centres on concerns – particularly among India's Western partners – about democratic backsliding. This paper examines the interplay between these two narratives, and more specifically, what India's status as the world's largest democracy means for its global role and relations with the West.
- While many Western governments have long held up India's democratic credentials as a key pillar for engagement with the country, Indian foreign policy often appears out of sync with Western democracies. New Delhi rarely employs democracy promotion as an explicit tool of its foreign policy. India is not unique among democratic states in placing pragmatism above principle in the conduct of its foreign policy. But New Delhi's firm adherence to principles of non-interference and sovereignty means that its democracy promotion tends to be pursued more subtly, subsumed under broader development initiatives.
- Under the Modi government, the democracy narrative has tilted towards a greater emphasis on promoting good governance through the 'democratization of technology'. With technology cooperation being a key area of India's engagement with the West, digital public infrastructure (DPI) is an emerging area of collaboration in the Global South. Western governments have thrown their weight behind New Delhi as India competes with China for leadership of the Global South.
- The challenge is India's domestic political trajectory. India has become less liberal over the last decade, but it has arguably become better governed. However, the illiberal turn in India's democracy and its more muscular deployment of Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) within its foreign policy may complicate a deepening relationship with the West. This will not preclude policy-focused collaboration, but it is likely to place limits on deeper collaboration in sensitive areas such as intelligence sharing. Ultimately, too, it may raise questions about India's claims to offer a worldview that is non-Western but not explicitly anti-Western.

Introduction

Two narratives dominate global discussions about India today: one is on the country's rise as an increasingly prominent geopolitical and economic actor; the other centres on concerns – particularly among India's Western partners – about democratic backsliding. As India goes to the polls in 2024, this paper examines the interplay between these two narratives, or more specifically, what India's status as the world's largest democracy means for its global role and relations with the West. It does so by analysing how the changing nature of India's national identity impacts the country's foreign policy.

For many Western countries, India's democratic credentials have long been regarded as a key pillar for engagement. As just one illustration of this, in December 2021 India was invited by US president Joe Biden to join the inaugural Summit for Democracy, while several other countries that are at least nominally democratic (among them Bangladesh, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand) were notably excluded. India is also a member of the Quad (formally, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) grouping of 'maritime democracies' – together with Australia, Japan and the US – with a shared commitment to upholding a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. The preamble to almost every joint statement between India and a Western country points to their common democratic heritage as the basis for deepening engagement. While this may seem rhetorical, it alludes to the fact that the West's relations with India are seen to be underpinned by not just by shared interests – as might also be the case with more transactional relationships with countries such as Saudi Arabia or Vietnam – but by shared values.

India's status as the world's largest democracy – or 'Mother of Democracy', as the government prominently branded it both during India's G20 presidency and at the Summit for Democracy in 2023¹ – is also intrinsic to its claim to global leadership and ambitions for a more prominent role in global forums (including a permanent seat on the UN Security Council).

But what does India's democratic status mean for the country's foreign policy and engagement with the West? Even though Western governments promote India's democratic credentials, New Delhi itself rarely employs democracy promotion as an overt tool of its foreign policy. An erosion of India's democratic credentials would also have implications for how the country is perceived globally, and it would also prompt the West to review its cooperation with India.

This paper discusses the opportunities and challenges facing Western governments in their engagement with New Delhi based on India's democratic credentials. After discussing the state of Indian democracy and the nature and evolution of India's democracy promotion activities, it examines areas of convergence and divergence with the West. It then assesses potential risks on the horizon arising from the changing nature of India's polity. In conclusion, it emphasizes the need

¹ See, for example, Ministry of Culture (2023), 'Bharat: Mother of Democracy', <https://indiaculture.gov.in/bharat-mother-democracy>; Ministry of External Affairs (2023), 'Remarks by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi at the Leader-level plenary of the second Summit for Democracy', 29 March 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/36421/Remarks_by_Prime_Minister_Shri_Narendra_Modi_at_the_Leaderlevel_plenary_of_the_second_Summit_for_Democracy.

for Western governments to take a more nuanced view of India's democracy and how it influences the global role played by India, and of the nature – and limits – of New Delhi's engagement with the West.

India goes to the polls: attributes of Indian democracy

Beginning on 19 April 2024, India is set to undertake the world's largest electoral exercise – involving approximately 970 million registered voters out of a total population of some 1.4 billion.² Under the leadership of prime minister Narendra Modi, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) has defied the norms of Indian politics that favour anti-incumbency and unwieldy coalition governments,³ and has been in power for almost a decade. Already, the party has secured an unprecedented mandate two elections in a row, in 2014 and 2019, with its electoral achievement resting on four key pillars: the BJP's Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) ideology; its welfare- and development-driven agenda; a more assertive and muscular foreign policy; and the Modi 'brand'.

Recent years have seen growing concerns about democratic backsliding and the nature of India's polity. Over the decade that the BJP has been in power, assessments of the country's democracy have pointed to a downward trajectory (summarized in Figure 1), with its democratic principles, including freedom of expression, under strain.⁴ India's secular credentials have also been called into question as minority rights have been squeezed.

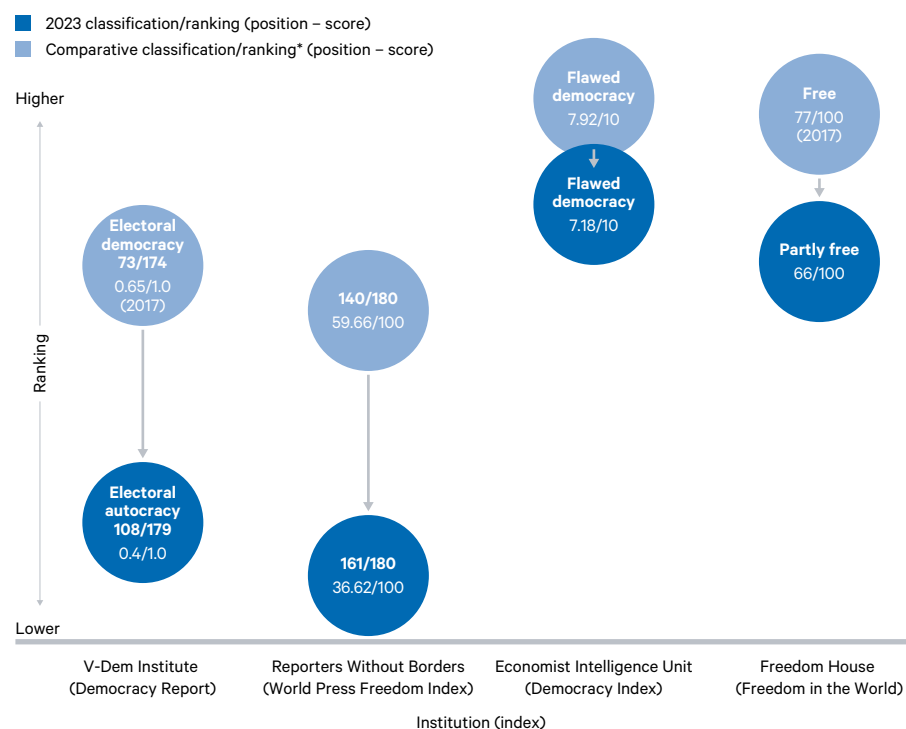
At the same time, it is important to recognize that Indian democracy is more robust than may be commonly perceived. India's governance today is far removed from where it was in 1975, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency and suspended democratic rule for almost two years. India maintains a vibrant opposition, particularly at the state level: in the south of the country, for instance, where local identities and politics are well entrenched, the BJP has struggled to gain a foothold in state elections. Voters therefore maintain a high degree of democratic autonomy, and elections remain relatively free and fair – although the erosion of a free and independent press raises questions about citizens' ability to make fully informed decisions. The plethora of political parties at state level also reflects India's federal structure, which grants a high degree of autonomy to states in the implementation of key economic and social policies.

² From April 2023, India's population was projected to match and thereafter exceed China's. See United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2023), 'India overtakes China as the world's most populous country', Policy Brief No 153, April 2023, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/un-desa-policy-brief-no-153-india-overtakes-china-as-the-worlds-most-populous-country>.

³ India has the world's highest rate of anti-incumbency across state and national elections, and every government between 1989 and 2014 required a coalition of parties to secure a parliamentary majority.

⁴ Varshney, A. (2017), 'Narendra Modi's illiberal drift threatens Indian democracy', *Financial Times*, 17 August 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/0015a59e-80e2-11e7-94e2-c5b903247afd>; Alizada, N. et al. (2021), *Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021*, University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, https://v-dem.net/documents/12/dr_2021.pdf.

Figure 1. India's deteriorating global democracy rankings



*Comparative classification/ranking for 2014 (the year the BJP assumed power) unless otherwise specified.

Sources: Papada, E. et al. (2023), *Defiance in the Face of Autocratization: Democracy Report 2023*, University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, https://v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf; Lührmann, A. et al. (2017), *Democracy at Dusk? V-Dem Annual Report 2017*, University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, https://v-dem.net/documents/18/dr_2017.pdf; Reporters Without Borders (2023), World Press Freedom Index | India, <https://rsf.org/en/country/india>; Reporters Without Borders (2014), World Press Freedom Index, <https://rsf.org/en/node/79154>; Economist Intelligence Unit (2023), Democracy Index 2023, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023>; Economist Intelligence Unit (2014), Democracy Index 2014, https://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=Democracy0115; Freedom House (2023), Freedom in the World 2023, Washington, DC, Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_World_2023_DigitalPDF.pdf; Freedom House (2017), Freedom in the World 2017, Washington, DC and New York, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FIW_2017_Report_Final.pdf.

Ultimately, India's model of democracy is different to that of its Western counterparts. Its democracy remains well embedded in Indian society, as characterized by the Panchayat Raj system of village governance that dates back over three millennia.⁵ Dynastic politics is also a key component, rooted in a system of patronage that can be traced to India's caste system and the era of princely states. Most of India's political parties are dominated by personal identity, revolving around one or more family or leader. This mix creates a unique political system whereby a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy co-exists with more indigenous systems of governance.

⁵ IANS via *Economic Times* (2022), 'Panchayats are pillars of Indian Democracy: PM Modi', 24 April 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/panchayats-are-pillars-of-indian-democracy-pm-modi/articleshow/91046331.cms>.

These attributes of Indian democracy have become increasingly consequential for the country's foreign policy as India acquires more tools and platforms to engage with the outside world and project its hard and soft power internationally.⁶

India's model of democracy promotion

India's model of democracy promotion is rooted in a belief held by successive governments in New Delhi that, as a non-Western, developing country, it is uniquely positioned to offer positive lessons to fellow democracies in the Global South.⁷ Embedded within this narrative is India's ability to challenge a supposed trade-off between democracy and development. Speaking in 2005, India's then prime minister, Manmohan Singh, noted: 'our experience of more than 50 years of democratic rule demonstrates how democracy is a most powerful tool to successfully overcome the challenge of development'.⁸

Narendra Modi echoed this narrative at the 2023 Summit for Democracy:

India, despite many global challenges, is the fastest growing major economy today. This itself is the best advertisement for democracy in the world. This itself says that Democracy Can Deliver.⁹

India has long been wary of engaging in overt democracy promotion, concerned that such activities would be perceived as a form of intervention that challenges the sovereignty of partner nations. In the Cold War era, for instance, advancing the common interests of developing countries through such groupings as the Non-Aligned Movement took precedence over democracy promotion. India has also tended to hold back from calling for changes in non-democratic regimes. (In some cases, such as Gulf states that are important to India's foreign remittances and oil imports, it might be argued that New Delhi's position is not so far removed from that of Western governments that have also been ambivalent in their response to non-democratic behaviours in states viewed as economically and strategically important.) Even where India has at times taken a principled stance in support of democracy, geopolitics and security considerations eventually tend to gain the upper hand. This was evident in the case of India's position on Myanmar, which shifted from backing the pro-democracy movement towards supporting the military junta regime (see below). New Delhi has also been concerned that a more interventionist approach to democracy promotion in its external engagements could bring unwelcome scrutiny of India's own democratic credentials.¹⁰

⁶ Nye, J. S., Jr (2004), *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: PublicAffairs.

⁷ Mallavarapu, S. (2010), 'Democracy promotion circa 2010: an Indian Perspective', *Contemporary Politics*, 16(1), pp. 49–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569771003602895>.

⁸ Government of India, Former Prime Minister of India Dr Manmohan Singh (2005), 'PM's remarks at the launching of UN Democracy Fund', 14 September 2005, <http://archive.pmo.nic.in/drmanmohansingh/speech-details.php?nodeid=187>.

⁹ Ministry of External Affairs (2023), 'Remarks by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi at the Leader-level plenary of the second Summit for Democracy', 29 March 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/36421/Remarks_by_Prime_Minister_Shri_Narendra_Modi_at_the_Leaderlevel_plenary_of_the_second_Summit_for_Democracy.

¹⁰ Sandeep, E. (2021), 'Historical Understanding of India's Democracy Promotion Policy towards South Asia', *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 11(1), p. 757, <http://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.11.01.2021.p10992>.

In practice, India's democracy promotion is often subsumed within development cooperation and broader capacity-building and technical assistance.¹¹ In pursuing a more low-key approach to democracy promotion, India's primary objective is to uphold the principle of respecting states' sovereignty and maintaining cordial relations with other countries – both democracies and non-democracies – in the Global South. For instance, India has offered practical support for conducting elections through the provision of electronic voting machines (EVMs) and indelible election ink.¹² India's indelible election ink, which has been used in Indian elections since 1962, has been supplied to 30 countries.¹³ And having used EVMs for its own elections since 2001, India has provided technical assistance on the use of EVMs to half a dozen countries.¹⁴ India, which holds one of the oldest constitutions in the Global South, has also provided assistance to several countries – particularly those that have a shared historical experience as former British colonies – in constitution drafting.

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The primary institution of India's democracy promotion activities is the Election Commission of India (ECI) and its training institute, established in 2011, the India International Institute of Democracy and Election Management (IIIDEM). The International Election Visitors' Program is the principal mechanism through which the ECI cooperates and engages with the election management bodies of other countries and organizations. The Indian Technical Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme has also been active in supporting election management activities in other developing countries. The range of activities by these bodies is summarized in Figure 2.

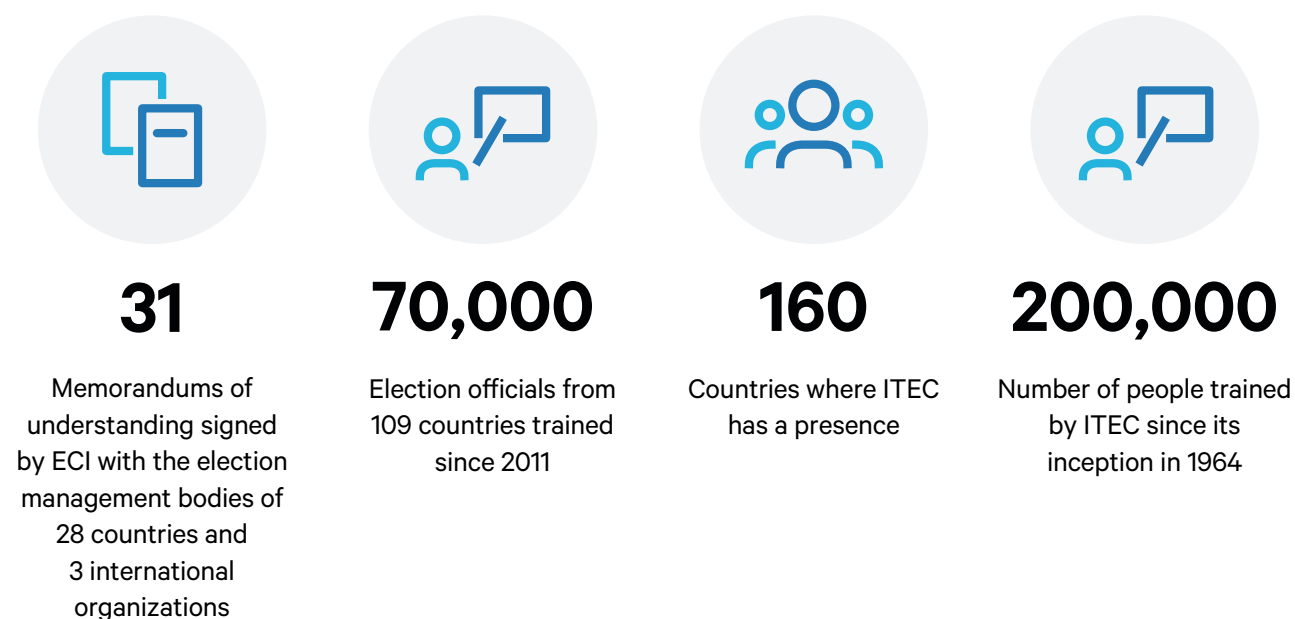
¹¹ Democracy promotion can take various forms. Activities range from political party development to election monitoring, supporting the development of a free and independent media, capacity-building for state institutions, judicial, legislative and civil society training, and conditional development aid. See Mazumdar, A. and Statz, E. (2015), 'Democracy Promotion in India's Foreign Policy: Emerging Trends and Developments', *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 42(2), p. 78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.2015.1034611>; Grimm, S. and Leininger, J. (2012), 'Not all good things go together: Conflicting objectives in democracy promotion', *Democratization*, 19(3), pp. 391–414, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2012.674355>.

¹² Choedon, Y. (2015), 'India and Democracy Promotion: Cautious Approach and Opportunity', *India Quarterly*, 71(2), p. 169, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928414568618>.

¹³ Firstpost (undated), 'Inked into history: 10 facts about the indelible ink used in Indian election', <https://www.firstpost.com/web-stories/india/inked-into-history-10-facts-about-the-indelible-ink-used-in-indian-elections-10012.html> (accessed 3 January 2024).

¹⁴ Singh, H. (2020), 'Which Countries use Electronic Voting Machines?', *Jagran Josh*, 6 February 2020, <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/which-countries-use-electronic-voting-machines-1548418168-1>; Ravi, S., Debnath, S. and Kapoor, M. (2017), 'The impact of Electronic Voting Machines on electoral frauds, democracy, and development', 20 March 2017, Brookings Institution, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/working-paper-using-technology-to-strengthen-democracy>.

Figure 2. Democracy promotion activities of the Election Commission of India (ECI) and Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme



Sources: Election Commission of India (undated), International Cooperation, <https://old.eci.gov.in/divisions-of-eci/international-cooperation> (accessed 14 December 2023); Ministry of External Affairs (2023), *Annual Report 2022*, p. 218, https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/36286_MEA_Annual_Report_2022_English_web.pdf.

Since the end of the Cold War, New Delhi has demonstrated greater willingness to engage in democracy promotion. This has been motivated by a desire for India to be recognized as a responsible global power through its championing of issues of global governance. India hosted the World Movement for Democracy conference in New Delhi in 1999, for instance, and was one of the founder members of the Community of Democracies in 2000 and its offshoot the UN Democracy Caucus in 2004. The IBSA Dialogue Forum, established in 2003, comprising three major democracies in the Global South – India, Brazil and South Africa – has also sought to strengthen South–South cooperation, although it has been overshadowed by forums such as the BRICS over the last decade or more.

India has also employed democracy promotion as a means to challenge China's self-perceived leadership of the Global South. This is rooted in India's belief that while China maintains a lead in its coercive (economic and military) hard power, New Delhi can challenge Beijing through its more co-optive soft power. The latter includes the country's democratic credentials, but also its 'civilizational' identity.¹⁵ Reflecting this, then prime minister Manmohan Singh asserted in 2005 that:

Liberal democracy is the natural order of political organisation in today's world. All alternative systems, authoritarian and majoritarian in varying degrees, are an aberration.¹⁶

¹⁵ Mazumdar, A. (2018), 'India's soft power diplomacy under the Modi administration: Buddhism, Diaspora and Yoga', *Asian Affairs*, 49(3), pp. 475–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2018.1487696>.

¹⁶ Quoted in Cartwright, J. (2009), 'India's Regional and International Support for Democracy: Rhetoric or Reality?', *Asian Survey*, 49(3), p. 404, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2009.49.3.403>.

However, non-interference and sovereignty considerations remain a key pillar of Indian foreign policy. As such, New Delhi will only pursue democracy promotion where this is congruent with other geopolitical priorities, such as questions of India's international status, its relationship with the US, and/or where national interests and regional security considerations are at stake. Moreover, India tends to provide top-down assistance, working with governments (at their request), rather than bottom-up grassroots support for civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or rebel or separatist groups. There are no organizations in India that research and lobby for democracy promotion globally, as do, for instance, US-based foundations and NGOs such as the National Endowment for Democracy or Freedom House. While serving as India's foreign secretary some two decades ago, the diplomat Shyam Saran noted:

We don't believe in the export of ideology. We don't believe in the imposition of democracy or democratic values on any country. But if there is any interest in any country about our democratic institutions or in the institutions ... we are very ready to share these with any country.¹⁷

India has also become more open in condemning the suspension of democracy in various countries, although it remains selective in doing so, as shown by its less vocal stance on democratic reversals or backsliding in countries such as Myanmar and Bangladesh (see below) compared with others, among them Pakistan and Fiji.

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It is important to note that India will support state-building efforts that are under a UN mandate, and is one of the largest contributors of personnel to UN peacekeeping operations.¹⁸ However, India's voting record at the UN on issues of democracy and human rights reflects its wariness and ambiguity as regards democracy promotion.¹⁹

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¹⁷ Saran, S. (2005), 'Neighborhood Watch', *Outlook India*, 13 February 2005, <https://www.outlookindia.com/making-a-difference/neighbourhood-watch-news-226502>.

¹⁸ As at 30 November 2023, India was the third largest contributor of personnel to UN peacekeeping operations: United Nations Peacekeeping (2024), 'Contribution of Uniformed Personnel to UN by Country and Personnel Type', https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/01_contributions_to_un_peacekeeping_operations_by_country_and_post_68_november_2023_revision_1.pdf.

¹⁹ Mitra, D. (2023), 'From China to AI: How India Voted at the UN's Human Rights Body', *The Wire*, 18 July 2023, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/from-china-to-ai-how-india-voted-at-the-uns-human-rights-body>; Das, A. (2017), *A Fine Balance: India's Voting Record at the UNGA*, ORF Issue Brief No. 192, July 2017, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/fine-balance-india-voting-record-unga>.

interests and regional security considerations are at stake. Where it perceives limited added value, India will remain reluctant to weigh in. This means that where an authoritarian regime does not maintain a hostile attitude towards India (e.g. Russia or Iran), and/or where a regime is seen as enhancing India's national security (e.g. Myanmar or Bangladesh), the government will not push for democratic change.

Ultimately, pragmatism rather than principle will continue to guide the role India plays in democracy promotion. Given New Delhi's ambition to be perceived as a leader or 'voice' of the Global South, India's preference is for serving as a positive example to developing economies and extending what it regards as enabling rather than prescriptive assistance.²⁰

Box 1. South Asia: a more active and interventionist approach towards democracy promotion

India has long demonstrated an appetite for a more interventionist role within South Asia, with motives of preserving or promoting democracy in its own neighbourhood sometimes running in parallel with (or even secondary to) broader political and geopolitical considerations. The most prominent examples of this are India's interventions in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives in the 1970s and 1980s.

The India–Pakistan war of 1971 entailed Indian support for Bengali freedom fighters, which led to the formation of the state of Bangladesh. This intervention is a notable case of a democratic state supporting a separatist movement in another country. In Sri Lanka, India spearheaded efforts to grant greater autonomy to the country's ethnic Tamil minority population, which culminated in the failed deployment of peacekeepers to oversee the implementation of the 1987 Indo–Sri Lankan Peace Accord to end the country's civil war. India's military intervention in the Maldives in 1988 ended a coup attempt against the then president, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Prior to India's involvement, efforts by Gayoom to secure assistance from other neighbouring countries and Western powers had been unsuccessful.

Since the end of the Cold War, New Delhi has been less inclined to view its backyard as its exclusive sphere of influence. This has brought a greater willingness to work with like-minded countries and groupings, including the US, Japan and the European Union (EU) on development projects in the region. India's engagement in such initiatives has often been pursued under the aegis of the Development Partnership Administration, which was created in 2012 to coordinate the country's development aid projects.²¹

A particularly notable example of this is India's participation in international reconstruction and development efforts in Afghanistan following the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, although these efforts have stalled following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. India contributed to the multi-donor Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, provided training to election officials and members

²⁰ Mehta, P. B. (2011), 'Do New Democracies Support Democracy? Reluctant India', *Journal of Democracy*, 22(4), p.101, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/do-new-democracies-support-democracy-reluctant-india>.

²¹ Ministry of External Affairs (2023), *Annual Report 2022*, pp. 216 and 221–24, https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/36286_MEA_Annual_Report_2022_English_web.pdf.

of parliament, and supplied the country with electronic voting machines and indelible ink. India's efforts to support the stabilization of Afghanistan were driven not just by altruism. Self-interest was also an important consideration, given India's desire to dilute Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan and prevent the latter's re-emergence as a hub for terrorism.

India and the West also have a convergence of interests on democracy promotion in other countries in South Asia. In Nepal and Sri Lanka, notably, there has been support for post-conflict reconciliation and development efforts. However, there has also been a divergence of interests in some contexts, as illustrated by the case of Bangladesh (see Box 3).

Democratization of technology: digital public infrastructure

Over the last decade, the shift in the nature of India's democracy, from essentially inclusive and pluralistic to increasingly illiberal and majoritarian, has brought with it a shift in how New Delhi projects its democracy activities abroad.

The government continues to refer to India's democratic credentials as one of the justifications for India's expanding global role, notwithstanding the historically limited scope of its democracy promotion activities, as described in the previous section. This was particularly pronounced during India's G20 presidency, where the government made frequent references to India's status as the 'Mother of Democracy'.²²

Increasingly, however, India's democracy has been promoted through the prism of the country's civilizational identity and technological achievements. Addressing the first Summit for Democracy in 2021, Prime Minister Modi spoke proudly of the 'democratic spirit and ethos' of 'ancient India', while also pointing to the need to 'jointly shape global norms for emerging technologies like social media and cryptocurrencies, so that they are used to empower democracy, not to undermine it'.²³

India has latterly placed more emphasis on promoting global governance rather than promoting democracy. Particularly notable in this context is a pivoting of the narrative on democracy promotion to emphasize digital inclusion through digital public infrastructure (DPI) and the 'democratization of technology'.²⁴

²² See, for example, Ministry of External Affairs (2023), English translation of Prime Minister's remarks at the G20 Summit Session 1', 9 September 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37083/English_translation_of_Prime_Ministers_remarks_at_the_G20_Summit_Session_1.

²³ Ministry of External Affairs (2021), 'National Statement by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Summit for Democracy', 10 December 2021, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/34637/National_Statement_by_Prime_Minister_Narendra_Modi_at_the_Summit_for_Democracy.

²⁴ Ministry of External Affairs (2023), 'National Statement by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the General Debate of the 78th UNGA', 26 September 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37148/National_Statement_by_External_Affairs_Minister_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_the_General_Debate_of_the_78th_UNGA.

As noted by S. Krishnan, the current secretary of India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology:

As a democracy and as a country that believes in democratic values, it is very important to take everybody along. That is the context of what we intend to do with digital public infrastructure, which is an important part of democratizing access to public services.²⁵

DPI has brought improved welfare disbursement through direct benefit transfers that empower citizens who previously lacked access to formal healthcare, education and banking systems, while also reducing the scope for corruption through so-called facilitation payments.

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Within India, an 'India Stack' of digital public goods has been created, spanning a triad of digital identification, payments and data management. This has included Aadhaar – a government-run biometric digital identity system launched in 2010; the Unified Payments Interface – a digital payments system launched in 2016 through the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), a public-private venture; and DigiLocker – which enables secure online access to government documents. According to the IMF, citing official Indian estimates, India Stack resulted in cumulative savings for the government equivalent to 1.1 per cent of GDP between 2013 and March 2021.²⁶ It has also improved financial inclusion by enabling an increase in the share of adults with access to banking services from around 35 per cent in 2011 to around 80 per cent in 2017.²⁷ In this context, while India's democracy has become less liberal, it has arguably become better governed.

India has sought to replicate the success of its DPI model globally. With four billion people not having a digital identity and 1.3 billion not having a bank account, DPI has been promoted as a means to accelerate progress on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).²⁸ This has been facilitated by such

²⁵ Carnegie India via YouTube (2023), 'Keynote Address: India's Digital Age', speech by S. Krishnan, Geopolitics of Technology, Carnegie India, 4–6 December 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2k_0O43i6o&list=PLexQMwQXRkJXXnHrzYIBhUvO1_vPjCYKz&index=21.

²⁶ *Economic Times* (2023), 'With its digital public infrastructure, India projects its tech dominance globally', 10 June 2023, <https://government.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/digital-india/with-its-digital-public-infrastructure-india-projects-its-tech-dominance-globally/100894593>; International Monetary Fund (2023), *Stacking up the Benefits: Lessons from India's Digital Journey*, Working Paper, <https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400240416.001>.

²⁷ D'Silva, D., Filková, Z., Packer, F. and Tiwari, S. (2019), *The design of digital financial infrastructure: lessons from India*, BIS Papers No 106, Bank for International Settlements, <https://www.bis.org/publ/bppdf/bispap106.htm>.

²⁸ G20 (2023), 'Digital Economy Ministers Meeting: Outcome Document and Chair's Summary', 19 August 2023, <https://g7g20-documents.org/database/document/2023-g20-india-sherpa-track-digital-economy-ministers-ministers-language-g20-digital-economy-ministers-meeting-outcome-document-and-chair-summary>; UN Development Programme (2023), 'G20 Digital Ministers Recognize Digital Public Infrastructure as an Accelerator of the SDGs', press release, 19 August 2023, <https://www.undp.org/india/press-releases/g20-digital-ministers-recognize-digital-public-infrastructure-accelerator-sdgs>.

institutions as NPCI International Payments Ltd – a subsidiary of the NPCI that was set up in 2020 to facilitate payments abroad – and MOSIP (Modular Open Source Identity Platform), set up in 2018 to help governments create DPI capabilities. During India's G20 presidency, notably, New Delhi showcased DPI as a key tool for promoting an Indian model of global governance.²⁹ Among India-led G20 initiatives focused on DPI are the 'One Future Alliance', which aims to provide capacity-building, technical assistance and funding support for implementing DPI in low- and middle-income countries; a Global DPI Repository to share practices and experiences on the development and deployment of DPI among and beyond G20 member states; a social impact fund to help facilitate digital inclusion in the Global South; and the conclusion of memorandums of understanding with several countries to offer India Stack at no cost with open-source access.³⁰

Technology is not value-neutral, which is why India's democratic credentials and climate of openness and innovation have made it a preferred partner for Western countries in the area of technology cooperation. But digital public infrastructure could be subject to growing scrutiny if privacy and data protection concerns become intertwined with broader concerns about democratic backsliding in India.

However, India's DPI model has also raised concerns about data privacy, as the country's data protection laws have come under scrutiny for regulatory ambiguities and a string of data breaches.³¹ Technology is not value-neutral, which is why India's democratic credentials and climate of openness and innovation have made it a preferred partner for Western countries in the area of technology cooperation. In this context, DPI could be subject to growing scrutiny if privacy and data protection concerns become intertwined with broader concerns about democratic

²⁹ Press Trust of India via NDTV (2023), 'G20 Declaration: Significance of Digital Public Infrastructure Explained', 9 September 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/g20-declaration-significance-of-digital-public-infrastructure-explained-4375793>; Kant, A. and Mishra, S. (2023), 'The international significance of India's Digital Public Infrastructure', World Economic Forum, 23 August 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/08/the-international-significance-of-indias-digital-public-infrastructure>.

³⁰ Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Press Release, 'G20 Digital Economy Ministers' Meeting (DEMM) concluded with adoption of the G20 Digital Economic Outcome Document and Chair's Summary', press release, 19 August 2023 <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1950443>; Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (2023), "'Under India's G20 Leadership, Historic Global Consensus Achieved on DPI Definition, Framework, and Principles": MoS Rajeev Chandrasekar', press release, 19 August 2023, pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1954830; Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (2023), 'Prime Minister announces completion of Global Digital Public Infrastructure Repository and creation of a Social Impact Fund to advance Digital Public Infrastructure in Global South', 23 November 2023, pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1979113.

³¹ D'Cruze, D. (2023), 'Data Breach of 81.5 crore Indians: Hacker allegedly leaks Aadhaar, passport, personal details on dark web', *Business Today*, 31 October 2023, <https://www.businesstoday.in/technology/news/story/data-breach-of-815-crore-indians-hacker-allegedly-leaks-aadhaar-passport-personal-details-on-dark-web-403903-2023-10-31>; Bhattacharya, P. (2023), 'Making India's DPI model work for all', *Hindustan Times*, 20 September 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/making-india-s-dpi-model-work-for-all-101695216723552.html>.

backsliding in India. Digital identity, payments and data management systems are important in facilitating access to welfare payments and reducing corruption, but they also offer a means to strengthen a state's monitoring and surveillance of its citizens.

In a global context, the fact that India's G20 initiatives on DPI are voluntary means there is no guaranteed take-up of India's DPI model in other countries. Another challenge is that DPI requires a vast digital ecosystem – India's digital transformation has been enabled by factors including access to ultra-cheap telecom services and what is claimed to be the world's fastest 5G deployment³² – which other emerging economies may currently lack. The G20 Digital Economy Ministers Meeting acknowledged these concerns:

We also acknowledge that the lack of adequate safeguards, sustained financing, and technical assistance can result in poorly developed DPI leading to several risks including data breaches and privacy violations, improper and unlimited access to personal data, violation of intellectual property rights and security risks.³³

Notwithstanding these challenges, DPI offers a potential area of collaboration between India and the West in the Global South, particularly as technology cooperation more broadly is a key area of engagement. The next section explores this in the context Western support for India as a bulwark against the rise of China.

Are India and the West aligned on democracy promotion?

Transatlantic alignment and divergence

Democracy promotion has emerged as a key theme of deepening relations between India and the West. Central to the US–India relationship, for instance, is an established narrative of affinities between 'the world's oldest democracy' and 'the world's largest democracy'. This was one of the foundations of the rapprochement between New Delhi and Washington in the post-Cold War period, as reflected in the joint declaration that was concluded during President Bill Clinton's visit to India in 2000:

The United States and India are and will be allies in the cause of democracy. We will share our experience in nurturing and strengthening democratic institutions the world over and fighting the challenge to democratic order from forces such as terrorism.³⁴

The democratic foundations of the bilateral relationship also underpinned the claim to India and the US being 'natural allies', a term first used by India's then prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, during a visit to the US in 2000.³⁵ Vajpayee's

³² *Times of India* (2023), 'India now has the fastest 5G roll-out in the world: Sunil Mittal', 30 May 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/gadgets-news/india-now-has-the-fastest-5g-roll-out-in-the-world-sunil-mittal/articleshow/100608686.cms>.

³³ G20 (2023), 'Digital Economy Ministers Meeting: Outcome Document and Chair's Summary'.

³⁴ Peters, G. and Woolley, J. T. (undated), 'William J. Clinton, Joint Statement on United States-India Relations: A Vision for the 21st Century, March 21, 2000', The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/227677>.

³⁵ Asia Society (2000), 'Address by Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Prime Minister of India', 7 September 2000, <https://asiasociety.org/address-shri-atal-bihari-vajpayee>.

successor, Manmohan Singh, reiterated this sentiment in an address to a joint session of the US Congress in 2005: 'Our shared commitment to democratic values and processes has been a bond that has helped us transcend differences.'³⁶ Such a narrative has been maintained as the two countries have developed an increasingly multi-dimensional relationship. The Biden administration's 2022 National Security Strategy asserted that:

As India is the world's largest democracy and a Major Defense Partner, the United States and India will work together, bilaterally and multilaterally, to support our shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific.³⁷

The strategy also noted a need to work with like-minded states in 'creating a latticework of strong, resilient, and mutually reinforcing relationships that prove democracies can deliver for their people and the world'. New Delhi's pursuit of deeper ties with the US has been reflected in its stronger advocacy of democracy in its external engagements. This became particularly apparent under the premiership of Manmohan Singh (2004–14), who in his 2005 address to the US Congress stated: 'As democracies, we must work together to create a world in which democracy can flourish'.³⁸ In this context, the US and India established the Global Democracy Initiative in 2005, which aimed to share best practices and strengthen bilateral cooperation in capacity-building and institutional development in third countries.³⁹ India and the US also took a leading role in the launch of the UN Democracy Fund in the same year, with India being the second largest contributor after the US at the time the fund was established.⁴⁰

An established narrative of affinities between 'the world's oldest democracy' and 'the world's largest democracy' was one of the foundations of the rapprochement between New Delhi and Washington in the post-Cold War period.

Shared commitments to democracy have similarly been a key component of India's engagements with European economies. In the case of the UK, the '2030 Roadmap for India-UK future relations', published in 2021, underscores the two countries' democratic credentials as the foundation for the pursuit of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.⁴¹ Proposed cooperation in areas including trade, defence, climate and health is underpinned by the countries' status as 'two modern, open

³⁶ Government of India (2005), 'PM's address to Joint Session of the Congress', 19 July 2005, <https://archivepmo.nic.in/drmanmohansingh/speech-details.php?nodeid=145>.

³⁷ The White House (2022), *National Security Strategy*, p. 38, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

³⁸ Government of India (2005), 'PM's address to Joint Session of the Congress'.

³⁹ U.S. Department of State Archive (2005), 'U.S.-India Global Democracy Initiative', 18 July 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/rls/fs/2005/49722.htm>.

⁴⁰ Government of India, Former Prime Minister of India Dr Manmohan Singh (2005), 'PM's remarks at the launching of UN Democracy Fund'.

⁴¹ Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street (2021), '2030 Roadmap for India-UK future relations', 4 May 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/india-uk-virtual-summit-may-2021-roadmap-2030-for-a-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/2030-roadmap-for-india-uk-future-relations#ii-trade-and-prosperity>.

and democratic societies', with 'democratic norms and principles' serving as the 'mainstay for maintaining a rules based international system and respect for universal human rights'.

India's relations with the European Union (EU) and its member states are also underpinned by their common democratic foundations. The fact that India is only the second country (after the US) with which the EU has established a Trade and Technology Council (TTC) highlights the priority that Brussels has attached to the relationship with India. The joint statement of the first meeting of the India–EU TTC, which took place in May 2023, declared:

As vibrant democracies, open market economies and pluralistic societies, the European Union and India share fundamental values and have a common interest in ensuring security prosperity and sustainable development in a multi-polar world.⁴²

Among EU members, to take the example of France, the 25th anniversary of the India–France strategic partnership was marked in July 2023 by the adoption of a roadmap for the bilateral relationship to 2047. 'Horizon 2047' affirms the two countries' commitment to 'further deepen' their strategic partnership 'in keeping with universal values of liberty, equality, democracy and the rule of law' in order to 'strengthen cooperation in the sectors of the future'.⁴³ Similar language can be found in joint statements between the leaders of India and other European countries.

At present, the US and its European partners are broadly aligned on engaging India. But if concerns continue to grow about democratic backsliding in India, it is possible that a divergence could form in the transatlantic relationship.

There is often more rhetoric than substance to such statements, however. From a Western perspective, cooperation with India is rooted more in geopolitical considerations aimed at cultivating India as a bulwark against the rise of China (discussed below). Whether through growing defence cooperation, efforts to create a 'free and open' Indo-Pacific, or the promotion of India as a new industrial hub for the development of critical and emerging technologies as well as more resilient supply chains, the 'China factor' has been a key driver of deepening ties.

This also highlights a potential fault line in the transatlantic relationship in respect of India. At present, the US and its European partners are broadly aligned on engaging India. But if concerns continue to grow about democratic backsliding in India, it is possible that a divergence could form in the transatlantic relationship.

⁴² European Commission (2023), 'EU-India TTC Joint Statement: 1st Meeting of the Trade and Technology Council', 16 May 2023, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/eu-india-ttc-joint-statement>.

⁴³ Ministry of External Affairs (2023), 'Horizon 2047: 25th Anniversary of the India-France Strategic Partnership, Towards A Century of India-France Relations', 14 July 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36806/Horizon_2047_25th_Anniversary_of_the_IndiaFrance_Strategic_Partnership_Towards_A_Century_of_IndiaFrance_Relations.

In the US, there is a stronger consensus on viewing China as a long-term strategic rival, whereas for European governments the case for maintaining constructive engagement with China based on mercantilist interests holds more weight.⁴⁴ In this context, the perception of India as a bulwark against the rise of China is stronger in Washington than in Brussels. This means that the US is more likely to overlook or downplay concerns about the status of India's polity than are European countries, where human rights considerations have historically been more prominent in guiding foreign policy decisions.

Indian democracy as bulwark against China's one-party state

The idea of India as a bulwark against China is not new. In 1959, for instance, referring to 'the struggle between India and China for leadership of the East', the then senator John F. Kennedy emphasized: 'We want India to win that race. We want India to be a free and thriving leader of a free and thriving Asia.'⁴⁵ What has changed in recent years is the removal of the ideological constraints of the Cold War, which put India and the US on opposite sides of the divide, and a gradual deterioration in the US–China relationship. India is emerging as a potential beneficiary of the push by the US and other Western economies to decouple or de-risk supply chains away from China, particularly in areas with critical and emerging technologies. This has been facilitated by India's democratic credentials, demographic dividend, and the absence of any imminent or significant geopolitical fault lines with the West (in contrast to China, given its territorial disputes with other states in the East and South China Seas and risks of escalation over Taiwan).

Renewed border tensions between India and China in recent years have also made New Delhi more receptive to deepening engagement with the West.⁴⁶ When asked where India stands on relations with the West and the Russia–China axis following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, India's external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, noted '[W]e are a democracy; we are a market economy; we are a pluralistic society; we have positions on international law and I think that should give a fair part of the answer', adding that India's membership of the Quad 'should tell you which direction we are going'.⁴⁷

Engagement with India has also gained importance in the context of shaping relations between the West and the Global South, where India and China both seek a leadership role.⁴⁸ While Beijing and New Delhi share a preference for a multipolar

⁴⁴ Bland, B., Cainey, A. and Shetler-Jones, P. (2024), *Transatlantic China Policy: In Search of an Endgame*, London: Royal United Services Institute and Chatham House, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/emerging-insights/transatlantic-china-policy-search-endgame>.

⁴⁵ John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum (undated), 'Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, Conference on India and the United States, Washington, D.C., May 4, 1959', <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/india-and-the-us-conference-washington-dc-19590504>.

⁴⁶ *The Economist* (2022), 'China's frontier aggression has pushed India to the West', 15 December 2022, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/12/15/chinas-frontier-aggression-has-pushed-india-to-the-west>.

⁴⁷ Barman, S. R. (2022), 'Europe has to grow out of mindset that its problems are world's problems: Jaishankar', *Indian Express*, 4 June 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/europe-has-to-grow-out-of-mindset-that-its-problems-are-worlds-problems-jaishankar-7951895>.

⁴⁸ Jacob, H. (2023), 'How to Thwart China's Bid to Lead the Global South', *Foreign Affairs*, 25 December 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/how-thwart-chinas-bid-lead-global-south>; Mohan, C. R. (2023), 'It's Time to Tie India to the West', *Foreign Policy*, 9 February 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/09/india-modi-china-global-south-g7-g20-west-russia-geopolitics>.

global order and a more equitable distribution of power, India offers a more benign worldview that is non-Western but not explicitly anti-Western.⁴⁹

Engagement with India has gained importance in the context of shaping relations between the West and the Global South, where India and China both seek a leadership role.

India's DPI has notably been promoted as a low-cost, software-based equivalent of China's Belt and Road Initiative.⁵⁰ While there is a degree of hyperbole in such claims, there is evidence of growing Western collaboration with India in promoting DPI in the Global South. For instance, the US–India joint statement issued during Narendra Modi's visit to the US in June 2023 noted that the two countries intend to explore the development of a Global Digital Development Partnership to enable the deployment of DPI in developing countries.⁵¹ Shortly before that visit, the EU–India Trade and Technology Council reached a similar consensus, with their joint statement referring to their agreement 'to collaborate on enhancing the interoperability of their respective Digital Public Infrastructures and on this basis jointly promote secure, privacy-preserving solutions to the benefit of Developing Countries'.⁵²

A significant escalation of communal (religious) unrest within India, and/or signs that the BJP's Hindutva agenda is substantively influencing the country's external policies and engagements, might prompt Western countries to reconsider their present strategic calculations towards India. Those factors are further explored in the penultimate section of this paper (see 'Risks on the horizon', below). In the near term, however, India will continue to be viewed by the West (and the US in particular) as a potential bulwark against the rise of China, with India's 'imperfect' democracy outweighing China's one-party state when framed in the context of a long-term strategic rivalry between the US and China.

India's 'strategic autonomy' limits cooperation with the West

India's well-entrenched commitment to a position of 'strategic autonomy' in its foreign policy means that it will remain wary of joining any Western-led initiative to 'export' or impose democracy, particularly where such actions are viewed as intrusive or coercive. It has also made India reluctant to endorse the concept of 'responsibility to protect' (R2P), which entails collective international action

⁴⁹ ANI via The Print (2023), "India non-western, not anti-western": S Jaishankar, 29 September 2023, <https://theprint.in/world/india-non-western-not-anti-western-s-jaishankar/1783917>.

⁵⁰ *The Economist* (2023), 'How India is using digital technology to project power', 4 June 2023, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/06/04/how-india-is-using-digital-technology-to-project-power>.

⁵¹ Ministry of External Affairs (2023), 'India-USA Joint Statement during Official State visit of Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi to USA', 23 June 2023, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36711/IndiaUSA+Joint+Statement+during+the+Official+State+visit+of+Prime+Minister+Shri+Narendra+Modi+to+USA>.

⁵² European Commission (2023), 'EU-India TTC Joint Statement: 1st Meeting of the Trade and Technology Council'.

to respond to a state's failure to 'to end the worst forms of violence and persecution' towards its own population, but can also be seen as grounds for regime change through the unilateral use of force.⁵³

A prominent example of India's disinclination to involve itself in Western-led interventions was its eventual refusal to join state-building efforts in Iraq following the US-led invasion in 2003.⁵⁴ This was a significant decision at a time when the post-Cold War rapprochement in the US–India relationship was still in its early stages, so engagement in Iraq was seen as a means to cement relations with the US. Reflecting this, there were complex discussions in New Delhi (within the cabinet, among the parties of the governing coalition and with opposition leaders) about Washington's request for Indian participation in stabilization efforts, which would have entailed the deployment of some 20,000 Indian soldiers to northern Iraq. While the Indian parliament was unanimous in adopting a resolution deploring the US-led invasion of Iraq, it was more divided in the role it should play in subsequent state-building efforts. Several prominent Indian figures – from deputy prime minister L. K. Advani to members of India's defence establishment and political commentators – advocated sending Indian troops to Iraq. Ultimately, however, prime minister Vajpayee prevailed in opposing the decision.

India's long-standing commitment to omni- or multi-alignment in its foreign policy also means that it has been open to engaging non-democratic or weak democratic states. While India is not unique among democracies in doing so, its foreign policy often appears out of sync with Western democracies. In some cases, India's engagement with non-democratic regimes notably appears to align more closely with China than with the US. Two examples of this are India's relations with Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Box 2. Myanmar

India had initially been highly critical of democratic backsliding in Myanmar after the military government ignored the results of elections held in May 1990. Reflecting this, in 1995 India granted the pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding. Subsequently, however, concerns in New Delhi that Myanmar was becoming a client state of China, coupled with development and security objectives in India's northeast, led India to re-engage with the military regime. This shift brought New Delhi's approach towards Myanmar broadly in line with the policy of 'constructive engagement' being pursued by neighbouring countries, including the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with which India was seeking to improve relations as part of its 'Look East' policy. This ran counter to the approach taken by Western countries seeking to isolate the regime in Myanmar.

⁵³ United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect (undated), 'Responsibility to Protect', <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.shtml>; Chandra, V. (2021). 'Explaining India's Approach to Responsibility to Protect', *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, 25(2), pp. 187–207, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09735984211043052>.

⁵⁴ Mitra, D. (2016, republished 2023), 'How India Nearly Gave in to US Pressure to Enter the Iraqi Killing Zone', *The Wire*, 19 March 2023 [republished], <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-nearly-gave-us-pressure-join-iraq-war>.

While these differences became less pronounced as Myanmar reverted to a more democratic form of government following elections in 2010, the resumption of military rule since 2021 has brought a return to the divergent approaches by India and the West towards Myanmar. New Delhi has maintained engagement with the military State Administration Council, which has included the provision of military aid, investment in infrastructure projects, and abstaining in UN resolutions calling for an end to the conflict and resumption of democracy.⁵⁵

Box 3. Bangladesh

Bangladesh has become a virtual one-party state as the governing Awami League (AL) has consolidated power while the country's two major opposition parties – the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami – have been purged or proscribed. While New Delhi is a key supporter of the AL government, the West is highly critical of democratic backsliding in the country. This became apparent during the most recent elections, in January 2024, when the US imposed visa restrictions on several Bangladeshi nationals for 'undermining the democratic election process' ahead of the election.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, New Delhi welcomed the outcome of the election, at which Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina secured a fifth term of office, despite questions over the credibility of the process in the absence of several prominent opposition parties and a low voter turnout.

From India's perspective, geopolitics trumps democracy promotion in its relations with Bangladesh. New Delhi prefers the more India-friendly and secular AL government in Dhaka to the more adversarial relationship with Bangladesh under previous BNP governments, which also tended to lean more towards an embrace of Islamist extremism. Under Hasina, bilateral relations have flourished, tensions over the poorly demarcated India–Bangladesh border have dissipated, and the pursuit of several cross-border infrastructure projects has further consolidated ties. Additionally, from New Delhi's perspective, the stability and predictability offered by continuity under successive AL administrations is preferred to the previous (and at times violent) history of oscillation of power between two major political parties, with the rapid policy shifts that entailed.

This puts India's staunch support of the AL government at odds with the increasingly vocal criticism of Bangladesh's political trajectory in the West.

⁵⁵ Hmung, Z. T. and Indergaard, J. (2023), 'Time is Running Out for India's Balancing Act on the Myanmar Border', United States Institute of Peace, 15 June 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/time-running-out-indias-balancing-act-myanmar-border>.

⁵⁶ U.S. Department of State (2023), 'Taking Steps to Impose Visa Restrictions on Individuals Involved in Undermining the Democratic Election Process in Bangladesh', press statement, 22 September 2023, <https://www.state.gov/taking-steps-to-impose-visa-restrictions-on-individuals-involved-in-undermining-the-democratic-election-process-in-bangladesh>.

Risks on the horizon

As noted in previous sections, there have been mounting concerns about – as well as evidence of – democratic backsliding in India in recent years. Whether India has ever truly been a liberal democracy is open to debate, but under BJP governments the illiberal components of India's identity have come to the forefront of the country's politics.⁵⁷ This presents limits on the degree of cooperation that is actually possible between India and West on the issue of democracy. It also underscores that while India is a proponent of the rules-based international order, this is not the same as the liberal international order: India's position on the latter is more ambiguous.⁵⁸ So, while India and the West undoubtedly have shared interests, these do not necessarily extend to the domain of shared values. This distinction is likely to become more pronounced if or when the BJP's Hindutva agenda spills over into the foreign policy domain.

Democratic backsliding

Recent years have seen growing concerns about the health of Indian democracy. The government has been accused of pursuing authoritarianism by stealth through controlling key levers of power, including the security services, tax authorities and the media. This has been evident with tax raids targeting NGOs and media organizations,⁵⁹ punitive actions taken against opposition politicians via government institutions such as the Enforcement Directorate;⁶⁰ and concerns about media self-censorship. As regards the latter, between 2022 and 2023, India fell 11 places on Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) World Press Freedom Index, from 150 to 161 (it was ranked 140 in 2014), with RSF describing 'violence against journalists, the politically partisan media and the concentration of media ownership [among a small number of sprawling companies]'.⁶¹ Freedom House has noted a deterioration in internet freedom in India, amid frequent internet shutdowns and efforts to censor online content, combined with growing use of digital platforms to harass critics of the government and drive self-censorship.⁶² Such concerns have been compounded by fears over the eroding independence of India's judiciary and election commission.⁶³

Under the Modi administration's 'One Nation, One Election' agenda, national and state elections would take place simultaneously. While this is ostensibly about improving the efficiency of the electoral process, it also offers a means to give

⁵⁷ Saghal, N. et al. (2021), *Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation*, Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/religion-in-india-tolerance-and-segregation>.

⁵⁸ Mishra, A. (2023), 'The World Delhi wants: official Indian conceptions of international order, c. 1998–2023', *International Affairs*, 99(4), pp. 1401–19, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaad126>.

⁵⁹ Amnesty International (2022), India: 'Heavy-handed' raid on Oxfam India and other major NGOs by authorities in move to silence criticism', press release, 8 September 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/india-heavy-handed-raid-oxfam-india-and-other-major-ngos-authorities-move-silence>; Wright, G. (2023), 'BBC India offices searched by income tax officials', BBC News, 14 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-64634711>.

⁶⁰ *The Economist* (2024), 'Are India's corruption police targeting Narendra Modi's critics?', 5 February 2024, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2024/02/05/are-indias-corruption-police-targeting-narendra-modis-critics>.

⁶¹ Reporters Without Borders (2023), World Press Freedom Index, <https://rsf.org/en/country/india>.

⁶² Freedom House (2023), 'Freedom on the Net: India', <https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-net/2023>.

⁶³ Pandey, M. (2023), 'Decoded: What is the new Election Commissioner Bill, and what does it propose', *India Today*, 13 December 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/election-commissioner-bill-2023-decoded-appointment-conditions-of-service-and-term-of-office-bill-2475315-2023-12-13>.

an unfair advantage to the governing party at the centre over regional parties, and potentially weakening India's federal structure. Plans to redraw parliamentary constituencies by 2026, which will revise the number of seats allocated to each state in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of parliament), are also likely to give an advantage to the BJP. Additional seats will likely be assigned to the more populous northern states in the Hindi-speaking heartland where the BJP is well entrenched, while reducing the share of seats available to the country's southern states which are not controlled by the BJP.

Communal unrest has also become an issue of growing concern. This has been illustrated by developments in the northeastern state of Manipur, where violence erupted in May 2023 between two ethnic-religious groups, leaving over 200 people dead and displacing some 70,000 people. This has prompted fears that violence could similarly break out along ethnic, caste and/or religious lines in other states, both in the run-up to the 2024 general election – as parties resort to divisive identity-based politics to shore up their position – and also beyond the election as the BJP doubles down on its Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) agenda. There are already signs of the former, not least in the consecration of a Hindu temple in the city of Ayodhya, in January 2024, on the site of a mosque that was demolished by Hindu mobs in 1992. (Almost 2,000 people were killed in months of rioting triggered by the destruction of the mosque, which was fuelled by claims that it was built in the 16th century on the site of an ancient Hindu temple marking the birthplace of the Hindu God Ram.)

When it comes to assessing the Modi government's likely third-term priorities, the record of its first two terms in office, during which it pursued several divisive identity-based policies, is instructive. These included rescinding the special status of Jammu and Kashmir through the revocation of Articles 370 and 35(a) of the constitution; and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019, which expedites the citizenship application process for people from persecuted religious minorities in several neighbouring countries who entered India before 2015, but notably not for Muslims.⁶⁴ A third-term Modi government is likely to double down on the government's identity-based policies, including the possible introduction of a uniform civil code whereby there would be a single set of personal laws governing marriage, divorce and inheritance across religious communities. Such developments will continue to raise concerns in the West about India's democratic and secular credentials.

Hindutva entering the foreign policy domain

Beyond concerns about the health of India's democracy, there are also grounds for worry that the government's Hindutva agenda may spill over into the foreign policy domain. So far, the signs of this drift have been more symbolic, such as use of the name Bharat rather than India during the G20 Summit; growing use of vernacular rooted in India's civilizational identity, such as Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam ('world as one family'), India as Vishvaguru ('world teacher') and Vishvamitra ('friend to the world'); and efforts to project India's soft power through cultural 'assets' such

⁶⁴ Henry, N. and Armstrong, K. (2024), 'CAA: India to enforce migrant law that excludes Muslims', BBC News, 12 March 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-68538260>.

as yoga and Buddhism.⁶⁵ Such actions are largely benign, especially when compared with the more overtly anti-Western worldviews being propagated by countries such as China or Russia.

India's ambition to project itself as a civilizational state signals the emergence of a more assertive foreign policy. But should this take the form of India seeking exemptions from global norms and rules because of its special or exceptional status, its assertiveness risks becoming more problematic.

However, India's ambition to project itself as a civilizational state signals the emergence of a more assertive foreign policy. This is not a problem in and of itself, especially as the country seeks recognition of its status as a responsible global power. During its G20 presidency, notably, the country sought to offer Indian solutions to global issues such as climate change, DPI and health.⁶⁶ But should the pursuit of a more assertive foreign policy take the form of India seeking exemptions from global norms and rules because of its special or exceptional status, this risks becoming more problematic.

The recent sharp deterioration in relations between the governments of India and Canada is of relevance in this context. Speaking in parliament in September 2023, Canada's prime minister stated that there were 'credible allegations of a potential link between agents of the government of India and the killing of a Canadian citizen',⁶⁷ in reference to the assassination, in June of that year, of a Canadian national linked to the Sikh separatist Khalistani movement.⁶⁸ New Delhi dismissed the allegations as 'absurd',⁶⁹ and as relations deteriorated in the following weeks India forced the departure of 41 Canadian diplomats after threatening to withdraw their immunity if a demand for a scaling back of Canada's diplomatic presence in the country was not met.⁷⁰ India also suspended visa services and issued travel advisories for Indians travelling to Canada. India's response to the allegations made by Trudeau was in line with the more muscular Indian foreign policy in recent years, including its propensity to retaliate strongly against actions that challenge India's sovereignty or status.

⁶⁵ Mazumdar, A. (2018), 'India's soft power diplomacy under the Modi administration: Buddhism, Diaspora and Yoga', *Asian Affairs*, 49(3), pp. 475–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2018.1487696>.

⁶⁶ Bajpae, C. (2023), 'Why India's G20 triumph means much more than tangible results', *South China Morning Post*, 19 September 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3234935/why-indias-g20-triumph-means-much-more-tangible-results>.

⁶⁷ CTV News via YouTube (2023), 'PM Trudeau | Credible allegations' that India was involved in killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar', 18 September 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEhJR3S58zc>.

⁶⁸ Bajpae, C. (2023), 'Why India's souring relations with Canada could have wider implications for the west', *Guardian*, 20 September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/sep/20/india-souring-relations-canada-assassination-foreign-policy>.

⁶⁹ Rajesh, Y. P. and Dayal, S. (2023), 'India rejects Canada's suspicions on role in Sikh leader's murder', Reuters, 19 September 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-dismisses-absurd-canadas-accusation-sikh-leaders-murder-2023-09-19>.

⁷⁰ Dyer, E. and Major, D. (2023), 'Government confirms 41 diplomats have left India as diplomatic tensions remains high', CBC News, 19 October 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/41-canadian-diplomats-left-india-1.7001515>.

The unsealing of a US federal indictment, in late November 2023, subsequently allowed for public scrutiny of the case related to an alleged attempt to assassinate a prominent Sikh separatist in the US.⁷¹ India's reaction to the allegations that emerged from the unsealing of the US indictment was notably more muted. While this was apparently consistent with New Delhi's appreciation of the US's more discrete handling of the investigation of this case, it also reflected recognition that it was more difficult for India to 'punish' the US in the same way as it had Canada.⁷²

Box 4. Relations with Israel

Another example of where BJP's Hindutva ideology has seemingly been used to guide the country's foreign policy concerns its relationship with Israel.⁷³ Officially, New Delhi has continued to maintain a balanced position by calling for a negotiated two-state solution to the Israel–Palestine issue. However, India's reaction to the hostilities triggered by the Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023 and subsequent retaliatory attacks by Israel on Gaza indicate a shift in New Delhi's position. On 27 October, notably, India abstained on a UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on the Gaza crisis that condemned 'all acts of violence' against Palestinian and Israeli civilians and called for an immediate humanitarian truce, having supported an ultimately unsuccessful amendment that explicitly condemned the Hamas attacks on Israel.⁷⁴ This was significant, as it signalled that New Delhi's position was out of step with large parts of the Global South: 120 countries voted in favour of the resolution, while India was one of 45 that abstained and the only country in South Asia to do so. It also demonstrated a shift in India's historical position, considering that it was the first non-Arab state to vote against Israel's admission to the UN in 1948, and to recognize the state of Palestine in 1988.

India did subsequently support an UNGA resolution, on 12 December 2023, that called for an 'immediate humanitarian ceasefire' in Gaza and the 'unconditional release of all hostages'.⁷⁵ In April 2024, however, India abstained in an ultimately successful vote in the UN Human Rights Council that made a call 'to cease the sale, transfer and diversion of arms, munitions and other military equipment to Israel' and expressed 'grave concerns at reports of serious human rights violations and grave breaches of international humanitarian law, including possible war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Occupied Palestinian Territory'.⁷⁶ New Delhi's

⁷¹ Sevastopulo, D. (2023), 'US thwarted plot to kill Sikh separatist on American soil', *Financial Times*, 22 November 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/56f7d6d6-6a93-4172-a49e-d8a91991e29d>; Office of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of Justice (2023), 'Justice Department Announces Charges in Connection with Foiled Plot to Assassinate U.S. Citizen in New York City', press release, 29 November 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-charges-connection-foiled-plot-assassinate-us-citizen-new-york>.

⁷² Onishi, N. (2023), 'Alleged Plot in New York Bolsters Canada's Accusations Against India', *New York Times*, 30 November 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/30/world/canada/india-assassination-plot-canada-sikh.html>.

⁷³ Bajpae, C. (2023), 'The Israel-Palestine Conflagration Is a Cautionary Tale for India's Global Ambitions', *The Diplomat*, 17 October 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/the-israel-palestine-conflagration-is-a-cautionary-tale-for-indias-global-ambitions>.

⁷⁴ UN News (2023), 'Gaza crisis: General Assembly adopts resolution calling for 'humanitarian truce', civilian protection', 27 October 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1142932>.

⁷⁵ UN News (2023), 'UN General Assembly votes by large majority for immediate humanitarian ceasefire during emergency session', 12 December 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/12/1144717>.

⁷⁶ UN News (2024), 'Gaza: Human Rights Council resolution urges arms embargo on Israel', 5 April 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/04/1148261>.

decision to abstain underscored the shift in its positioning on Israel–Palestine: India was one of 13 countries to abstain on the resolution (there were 28 votes in favour and six against), presented to the 47-member body by Pakistan on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

To be sure, New Delhi's positioning since October 2023 may be viewed as part of a longer-term evolution in India's relations with Israel since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1992. India–Israel relations have also been driven by pragmatic considerations rooted in Israel's growing strategic importance to India's defence and technology sectors, along with both countries' relations with the US. However, India's stance in recent months is also a reflection of the influence of elements of the BJP who see ideological affinities with counterparts in Israel, extending as far as shared perceptions of the two countries as religious-nationalist states facing an existential threat from Islamist extremism.⁷⁷ This has been complemented by the view that New Delhi no longer needs to appease India's minority Muslim population by downplaying relations with Israel while standing up for the Palestinians. Modi himself – notably, in 2017, the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel – has forged a close relationship with his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu. India's push to develop a more muscular foreign policy has also prompted speculation that the country is seeking to emulate Israel's security and intelligence apparatus.⁷⁸

From a foreign policy perspective, a deepening India–Israel relationship would bring New Delhi closer to the US's Middle East strategy. This has been reflected in India's participation in regional connectivity initiatives such as the I2U2 (Israel–India–US–UAE) established in 2022 and IMEC (India–Middle East Economic Corridor) in 2023, both of which are aligned with US efforts to facilitate a rapprochement between Arab states and Israel.

Conclusion

Many Western governments continue to point to India's status as the world's largest democracy as one of the key justifications for deepening engagement with the country. Meanwhile, New Delhi employs its democratic credentials as part of its claim to an expanded global role. In this context, it is important to understand what India's democratic status means for its foreign policy and the nature (and limits) of its engagement with the West.

⁷⁷ Nevatia, S. (2023), 'Why Zionism rules the hearts of Hindutva acolytes', *Frontline*, 14 December 2023, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/why-zionism-rules-the-hearts-of-hindutva-acolytes/article67637346.ece>; Jaffrelot, C. (2023), 'From Savarkar to Golwalkar, why Hindutva admires Zionism', *Indian Express*, 7 December 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/from-savarkar-to-golwalkar-why-hindutva-admires-zionism-9057486>.

⁷⁸ Chaya, D. P. (2023), 'The new Mossad? Canada murder has thrown a spotlight on India's spy network', *The Times*, 23 September 2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-new-mossad-canada-murder-has-thrown-a-spotlight-on-indias-spy-network-8fk0jqpck>; Shukla, V. (2023), 'Has India become the new Israel?', *New Indian Express*, 24 September 2023, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/magazine/2023/Sep/23/has-india-become-the-new-israel-2617039.html>; Farmer, B. and Lateef, S. (2023), 'Inside the shadowy Indian spy agency at the heart of Canada killing row', *Telegraph*, 24 September 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/09/24/raw-pavan-rai-canada-india-agency-hardeep-singh-nijjar>.

India has long been wary of engaging in overt democracy promotion, concerned that such activities would be perceived as a form of interventionism that challenges the sovereignty of partner countries. India's democracy promotion is often subsumed under broader nation- and state-building efforts. The country's firm adherence to principles of non-interference and sovereignty also means that democracy promotion will typically be limited to top-down technical assistance and institution-building activities rather than grassroots assistance to civil society groups. Unlike the West, India remains reluctant to use democratic transition as a condition of development aid. More assertive actions such as sanctions and regime change will generally be limited to countries within South Asia, and have often been driven more by geopolitical considerations than by a genuine desire to promote democracy.

India's long-standing commitment to 'strategic autonomy' in its foreign policy means that it has generally been open to engaging with all countries, irrespective of the nature of the regime. It is not unique among democratic states in doing so, but New Delhi's foreign policy often appears out of sync with many Western democracies.

Moreover, India's long-standing commitment to 'strategic autonomy', or omni-/multi-alignment, in its foreign policy means that it has generally been open to engaging with all countries, irrespective of the nature of the regime. While India is not unique among democratic states in doing so, New Delhi's foreign policy often appears out of sync with many Western democracies. Recent developments in Myanmar and Bangladesh provide examples of this, with New Delhi (similar to Beijing) more open to engaging these non-democratic and weak democratic regimes than the West. The reality is that while India and many Western countries have shared interests, their values may be different. India is a proponent of the rules-based international order, but its position as regards the liberal international order is more ambiguous.

At the same time, as a developing economy, India frequently has a better grasp of the priorities and needs of other countries in the Global South than do Western democracies. From training in constitution drafting to the provision of electronic voting machines and indelible ink during elections, along with the more recent promotion of DPI as a means of improving governance and access to welfare, India's model of democracy promotion may be more resonant with other emerging economies.

India is also employing its democratic credentials as a means of challenging China for leadership of the Global South. The West has leveraged this as a means of cultivating a more 'benign' non-Western worldview that presents an alternative

to the overtly anti-Western worldview of countries such as China, Russia and Iran. DPI is an obvious candidate for such collaboration, given that technology cooperation is a key component of India's engagement with the West.

The challenge is India's domestic political trajectory. So far, framed in the context of a long-term strategic rivalry between the US and China, Western governments' concerns over the direction of India's democracy have been secondary to those about China's one-party state. It is also important not to conflate India's increasingly illiberal trajectory with the state of the country's democracy overall: India has become less liberal over the last decade, but its democratic foundations remain more robust than is commonly perceived.

So far, framed in the context of a long-term strategic rivalry between the US and China, Western governments' concerns over the direction of India's democracy have been secondary to those about China's one-party state.

However, an erosion of these foundations (including through constitutional changes that undermine India's federal structure and further centralize power), would have implications for how India's democracy is perceived globally. This would prompt Western countries to review their cooperation with India. Already, there are some worrying signs as the BJP government pursues a more divisive, identity-driven path at home, and where the party's Hindutva agenda spills over into India's external engagements. India's efforts to project itself as a civilizational state signal the emergence of a more assertive foreign policy, with the potential for New Delhi to seek exemptions from global norms and rules because of its special or exceptional status.

Ultimately, pragmatism rather than principle will continue to determine India's foreign policy. Given New Delhi's ambition to be perceived as a leader or voice of the Global South, India maintains a preference for serving as a positive example and enabler, rather than proselytizing when it comes to promoting democracy globally. As such, it will only pursue democracy promotion activities where these are congruent with other geopolitical considerations that are important to India's worldview.

This will mean limits on the nature and extent of cooperation between India and the West. Concerns about democratic backsliding could also limit engagement between India and the West in third countries. At present, the West has been a strong proponent of India's efforts to be a voice of the Global South. This is predicated on India's support for the rules-based international order and its status as the world's largest democracy. However, a weakening of these credentials would undermine this narrative.

Taking the example of DPI, India's democratic credentials and climate of openness and innovation have so far made it a preferred partner for Western countries in the area of technology cooperation, especially when compared with China's

techno-surveillance state model. However, technology is not value-neutral, so DPI could be subject to growing scrutiny if privacy and data protection concerns become intertwined with broader concerns about democratic backsliding in India.

On a more fundamental level, a perceived erosion of India's secular and democratic credentials would undermine the normative foundations of its relationship with Western countries. This is unlikely to diminish Western governments' appetite to work with India in specific policy areas (e.g. technology, military and climate cooperation), especially as India continues to be seen as a bulwark against the rise of China. However, it could impose limits on the degree of cooperation in particularly sensitive areas such as intelligence sharing. In a worst-case scenario, a less liberal and less democratic India, with amplified human rights concerns and a growing geopolitical risk premium, could erode the attractiveness of the country as an investment destination and a potential beneficiary of the 'China Plus One' strategy of diversifying supply chains away from critical reliance on China.

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Cover image: Prime minister Narendra Modi of India welcomes US president Joe Biden for the G20 leaders' summit in New Delhi, 9 September 2023.

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