

## STATE OF INDIAN DEMOCRACY AND US-INDIA STRATEGIC COOPERATION: AN UNEASY CONVERGENCE?

Humayun Javed\* & Ameer Abdullah Khan\*\*

### Abstract

*US-India strategic convergence is likely to continue as Washington considers New Delhi a counterweight to Beijing. However, rising right-wing authoritarianism in India under BJP, marked by the erosion of democratic standards, has created a policy paradox for Biden Administration- how to balance geopolitical interests with democratic ideals. The paper argues that adhering to the norms of democracy is not just a normative concern but also a strategic concern for the US as democracy is one of the core pillars that sustains US- led liberal world order. However, the Biden administration does not appear to emphasize democratic values and human rights performance to the point where strategic convergence would seem at risk. Thus Biden administration is likely to emphasize democratic values and human rights performance to the point where strategic convergence would not seem at risk.*

**Keywords:** *Democracy, Human Rights, Balancing, US, India, China*

### Introduction

US-India relations have been driven by the convergence of their strategic interests and resemblance of democratic values. The emergence of China as a major player in international politics provided a new impetus to this relation. However, with the upsurge of Hindu nationalism in India and drifting away of the state from liberal democratic values under the leadership of Indian Premier Narendra Modi, a rift has appeared in the value system of both the states. Right-wing populism and extreme nationalism carried with ideological motives under state patronage characterize today's India, which the United States

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\* A graduate in International Relations from National Defence University, Islamabad. Email: humayunjaved347@gmail.com

\*\* Lecturer and PhD Scholar at National Defence University, Islamabad. Email : ameerabdullah@ndu.edu.pk

considers a counterweight to China in the region. Unlike Donald Trump, who provided a free pass to India on issues of democratic freedom and human rights, Biden has vowed to link geopolitical calculations with considerations for human rights and democratic values. This is imperative not only for Biden's domestic constituency but also for the US to retain the world order that has been designed by itself based on the values of liberal democracy and economy. He considers a coordinated foreign policy of democratic partners as an effective way to confront China's abusive behaviour and human rights violations.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, foreign policy blueprint, Interim National Security Strategy Guidance, showed Biden administration considering nationalism and authoritarianism as urgent threats which required preservation of democracy and coalition of democratic states to uphold American values and ideals.<sup>3</sup> This is also worth noting that this emphasis on preservation of democracy is not mere reflection of US normative standing but is also closely linked with its strategic interests. The US is facing the challenge to maintain the liberal world order that is based on multilateralism, democracy and free market. If any of these pillars is undermined greatly, it will give a serious blow to the US efforts to sustain its world order that is being challenged by non-democratic, authoritarian powers. In the shape of Brexit, this order has already suffered a shock. Now dwelling of the world's largest democracy into the hands of right-wing authoritarian government will do further damage.

Joe Biden's first foreign policy speech showed that Washington was committed to support and preserve democracies. However, the US is going to face a difficult situation when questions on India's record of human rights and democratic freedoms are to be raised.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the declining state of human rights under the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) rule in India could be worrisome for American State Department, which has doubled down on its criticism on authoritarian practices and human rights record in China. Consequently, as it appears, the U.S. could increasingly face criticism for double standards if it casts a blind eye on New Delhi's record of human rights while continuing intense rhetoric against Beijing. Thus, this paper hypothesizes that Biden administration's

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<sup>2</sup> Joe Biden, "Why American Must Lead Again: Recusing U.S. Foreign Policy after Trump," *Foreign Affairs* 99 (2020): 64, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/>

<sup>3</sup> Joe Biden, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," *The White House*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/>

<sup>4</sup> Joe Biden, "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World," *U.S. Department of State*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/>

hope to form a coalition of like-minded liberal states against authoritarianism in the context of rise of populist-religious nationalism in India could have significant implications for U.S.-India strategic cooperation. The study is based on two research questions. First it explores the implications of the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism – with consequences for democratic values and human rights record – on U.S.-India strategic convergence against the backdrop of an American administration committed to preserving democracies, countering right-wing populism, and confronting China on its record of human rights and freedoms. The second question explains that how the likely undermining of democracy in India and its toleration by the US can impact the global order that is already facing challenges from China through the rise of its material capabilities and presentation of an alternative to the liberal democracy. The paper justifies the hypothesis through the theory of democratization. The paper starts with discussion on strategic convergence between the US and India followed by an overview of declining state of democracy in India and subsequent challenges for Indo-US strategic partnership. The paper concludes that declining state of democracy in India will bring Indo-US strategic partnership to new tests because ignoring it will undermine Biden regime's commitment to counter China through the narrative of anti-Human rights agenda and also by undermine US led global order that is based on promotion of liberal democracy and freedom.

## **Theoretical Framework & Methodology**

The paper adopts the explanatory methodology to provide an enhanced understanding over the delicate issues of democracy and strategic interests of major powers. However, a plethora of freshly published literature can be found on challenges to democracy in the recent times but its relevance to the strategic relationships between major powers need more pondering. Additionally, this paper uses the theoretical framework of neoliberalism and consults literature on global order to justify the central argument. Out of different foci of neoliberalism, the paper specifically used the concept of democratization to explain the phenomenon under question.

Rooted in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century western political thought, neoliberalism can be understood through five major assumptions<sup>5</sup>. These include firm belief in human reasoning guiding towards cooperative approach of international relations, human progress as linear historic development, state-society linkage, economic interdependence, and role of international institutions. Using these assumptions, neoliberalism sees

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<sup>5</sup> Knud Jorgenson, *International Relations Theory: An Introduction* (Palgrave: London, 2018) 90.

international relations as an arena of international cooperation where the effects of international anarchy can be reduced through rational acts of states like<sup>6</sup> promotion of democracy, multilateralism and promotion of free trade and democracy. The spread of liberal democracy requires a participatory political culture where all the minorities (ethnic, religious, linguistic) get equal share in political processes at every level. In addition, it is coupled with spread of individual liberties throughout the society and respect for universal human rights and a free and transparent media and judiciary. In addition, a liberal democracy must ensure continued guarantee for minorities protection and their rights. The research incorporates the work of various theorists on democratization to understand the important indicators of democratic transition and consolidation. For the specific case of India, the work uses measures of democratization – concluded from different surveys and freedom measures – to understand how democratization could experience a reversal in a state due to the eroding of democratic institutions and values. The Freedom House annual report *Freedom in the World* (2022) declares India's relegation from the status of 'free state' to 'partially free state'.<sup>7</sup> Similarly an analysis of previous reports show a gradual decline in the state of Indian democratic values.<sup>8</sup> The most recent of these reports indicates the deteriorating state of necessary components of a democratic polity including– consent of the governed; accountability of institutions; adherence to the rule of law; respect for human rights; checks and balances through independent judiciary and media; and protection of minorities.<sup>9</sup> The same report argues that with the relegation of India to this status, a big percentage of the world population now lives out of the free world. The report also states that the fall of India from the upper ranks of free nations could have a particularly damaging impact on global democratic standards. This can mainly be attributed to the fact that India is home to 1 out of every 7 persons on the planet.

At the end of WW-I, the US President Woodrow Wilson tried to bring America out of isolationism under the liberal dream. However, it was after WW-II that the US showed a firm commitment to spread liberal democratic values throughout the world. This was a beneficial to the US in two ways. Firstly, it provided legitimacy to US fight against fascism during the war and policy of containment of USSR immediately after it. Secondly, it helped the US to gather around liberal democratic states and establish a world order where the US had a central role. Following the fall of USSR,

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Jackson, George Sorenson, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches* (Oxford University Press: London, 2013) 102.

<sup>7</sup> "Freedom in the World," *Freedom House*, May 16, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Fukuyama led the voices that avowed the championship of liberal democracy and liberal economies<sup>10</sup>. Though the US has not followed a black-and-white policy in terms of democratic values, yet the overall leaning of the US policy has been towards democracies. Special US relations with Israel, EU and India are some of the prominent examples to quote in this regard. Though the US has preferred strategic interest over democratic issues in its relations with Israel, still Washington has been facing troubles in defending Israeli actions. In case of India, the situation would be more complicated due to the size of Indian economy and population as well as its role in countering authoritarian states. The spread of and support for liberal democracy has had more of rational value for the US foreign policy than mere ideological one. This is the reason that US has been maintaining relations with monarchs as well as dictators in Asia, Africa and Latin America. However, recently, the neoliberal policy of the US has come across a new dilemma that is the rise of illiberal democracies and right-wing populism. India presents an ideal case in this regard where BJP led government following Hindutva ideology has come to power. The rise of BJP to power in India has been tantamount to the rise of illiberal democracy due to undermining of basic requisites for the spread of democracy. It is worth noting that the rise of BJP was made possible through the democratic process. So this can be viewed in linkage with the world-wide trends where right-wing populist and extremist leaders are coming to power through democratic processes, thus giving rise to illiberal democracies. This poses the aforementioned dilemma to the US foreign policy. The subsequent part of the paper justifies the central argument basing the neoliberal assumption that spread of liberal democracy and free market economy necessitates the acceptance and spread of liberal values in a society. If this platform is not set, the democracies tend to degenerate into illiberal democracies that negate the very core of liberal agenda that has been the hallmark of the US foreign policy. In case of India, deteriorating state of democracy will have negative consequences for Indi-US strategic convergence.

### **U.S.-India Strategic Convergence**

When, in 2001, President George W. Bush lifted all sanctions on India after its nuclear tests in 1998, relations between the two countries significantly improved and remains warm to this day. From the Bush administration signing a Civil Nuclear Deal with India to Hillary Clinton (Secretary of State under the Obama administration) calling New Delhi "an

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<sup>10</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (The Free Press: New York, 1992) 244.

indispensable partner",<sup>11</sup> relations between the United States and India have experienced greater strategic convergence in the last two decades. Only to be further intensified under Donald Trump, who considered India an essential strategic partner against China, labelled by his administration as "a revisionist power."<sup>12</sup>

Convergence of strategic interests, accordingly, is evident from several initiatives that both the states undertook, especially in the realms of defense and security in the last few years.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the U.S. designated India as a 'major defense partner' in 2016; U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue was established in 2018, paving the way for India to have access to advanced communication technology used in the U.S.. Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement was signed in 2018, allowing real-time information sharing between two states' militaries; and an intelligence-sharing agreement called Basic Exchange and Communication Agreement (BECA) was signed between the two states in 2020.<sup>14</sup> All these initiatives of defense partnership and security cooperation were taken in the backdrop of growing Chinese military power – a concern for both Washington and New Delhi, making India a natural partner for the U.S. to balance China.<sup>15</sup> Thus, these efforts have evoked U.S. defense secretary Mark Esper to label these responses as attempts against "increasing aggression and destabilizing activities by China."<sup>16</sup>

Defense partnership, therefore, is likely to continue given the growing American concern over China, making the U.S. consider India as its strategic partner to counterbalance Beijing – labelled as the "most serious competitor" by President Joe Biden in his first foreign policy

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<sup>11</sup> Yashwant Raj, "Indo-US Ties Indispensable Partnership," *Hindustan Times*, September 9, 2010, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world/>

<sup>12</sup> Mahrukh Khan, "Growing India-U.S. Strategic Cooperation," *Strategic Studies* 37, no. 4 (2017): 97-, <http://www.issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/>.

<sup>13</sup> Cara Abercrombie, "Realizing the Potential: Mature Defense Cooperation and the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership," *Asia Policy* 26, no. 1 (2019): 119, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/717563/summary>.

<sup>14</sup> "A Timeline of U.S.-India Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-india-relations>.

<sup>15</sup> Samit Ganguly and M. Chris Mason, *An Unnatural Partnership? The Future of U.S.-India Strategic Cooperation* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S Army War College Press, 2019), 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/>

<sup>16</sup> Anjana Pasricha, "With Eye on China, India and US Sign Landmark Military Agreement," *Voice of America*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/>.

speech after acquiring presidency.<sup>17</sup> The course of strategic convergence is likely to continue, as demonstrated by both Biden and Modi agreeing to continue close cooperation in their first call after Biden was sworn in as president.<sup>18</sup> Both leaders intended to support freedom of navigation, territorial integrity, and a stronger regional architecture through the Quad, thereby showing a greater vision for a coalition between the U.S. and India. This was followed by the first-ever Quad Summit held to promote “free, open, and rules-based order in Indo-Pacific” (a veiled reference to China).<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken – who, during his confirmation hearing, called America’s relations with New Delhi “a bipartisan success story” – has reaffirmed the strength of the U.S.-India strategic partnership with his Indian counterpart S. Jaishankar.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Lloyd Austin, U.S. defense secretary under Biden, assured Congress that he would “operationalize India’s major defense partnership status” – a commitment he emphasized with Indian defense minister Rajnath Singh as well.<sup>21</sup> On his visit to India, he reiterated American commitment to strengthening bilateral defense ties and strategic partnership amidst China’s growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, the recent Sino-Indian border standoff in the Himalayas has accelerated relations between the two countries.<sup>22</sup>

Consequently, these commitments and developments have considerable geopolitical implications and are likely to remain and get intensified since American concerns over strategic competition have been exacerbated: this has compelled Antony Blinken to single out China as the

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<sup>17</sup> Joe Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World,” The White House, February 5, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/>.

<sup>18</sup> “Readout of President Joseph Biden Call With Prime Minister of India,” *The White House*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/02/08/>.

<sup>19</sup> “Eye on China, Biden Holds First Summit with Japan, India and Australia,” *Dawn*, March 12, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1612105>.

<sup>20</sup> “Readout of Secretary Blinken’s Call with India External Affairs Minister Jaishankar,” *U.S. Department of State*, accessed January 29, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/>.

<sup>21</sup> “Would Further Operationalize India As Major Defense Partner: U.S. Secretary of Defense Nominee Lloyd Austin,” *Swarajya*, accessed January 23, 2021, <https://swarajyamag.com/insta/>.

<sup>22</sup> Tanvi Madan, “China Is Losing India: A Clash in the Himalayas Will Push New Delhi toward Washington,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2020-06-22/china-losing-india>.

"world's greatest geopolitical test for Washington." Therefore, it is evident that as concern for Beijing's rise grows in Washington, the United States and India are likely to head closer.<sup>23</sup>

## A Declining State of Democracy in India

When the U.S. and India celebrate their close relationship, the word 'democracy' gets a marked focus, depicting the greater significance of two nations converging on ideals of freedom and democracy.<sup>24</sup> India – considering itself 'world's largest democracy' – and the U.S. – referring to itself as 'world's oldest democracy' – often observe their strategic relationship with underlying notions of being natural partners, sharing common values. Today, such conceptions are more relevant when both share a convergence against China (which is criticized by both for having an authoritarian political system and an assertive outlook) and Indian democracy, on the other hand, faces an assault from right-wing authoritarianism marked by the centralization of power and curbing of freedoms.

Theories of democracy enable us to identify the key elements of a democratic polity. Leading American political scientist on democracy, Larry Diamond, considers participation, pluralism and representation of all citizens as vital to the system of democracy in a state.<sup>25</sup> Proponents of the theory of democratization see a guarantee of fundamental freedoms, provision of basic human rights, protection of minorities, the rule of law that applies equally to all citizens, decentralization of power and media freedoms as some essential components of democracy. The famous book on the meaning and purpose of democratic practices, "Theories of Democracy: A Reader", considers these elements to be vital for a democratic society according to classical, modern and contemporary commentators on the roots of the democratic ideal.<sup>26</sup> The work provides a consensus of social scientists on some basic principles of democracy concluded through democratic theorizing and used as indicators or

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<sup>23</sup> Jeff Smith "Austin Goes to India: An Agenda for India-U.S. Defense Consultations," The Heritage Foundation, March 18, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/austin-goes-india-agenda-india-us-defense-consultations>.

<sup>24</sup> "U.S. Relations with India: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, *U.S. Department of State*, January 20, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-india/>

<sup>25</sup> Larry Diamond, "What Is Democracy?" Stanford University, January 21, 2004, <https://diamond-democracy.stanford.edu/speaking/lectures/what-democracy>.

<sup>26</sup> Ronald J. Terchek and Thomas C. Conte, *Theories of Democracy: A Reader* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

measures of democratic values. Let us examine the condition of these essential credentials of a vibrant democracy in India.

The state of India sliding towards Hindu majoritarianism or extreme Hindu nationalism has seen an intense communal upsurge under the flag of the Hindutva project (a right-wing religious movement based on exclusive Hindu nationalism). For instance, New Delhi's divisive campaign against Kashmiris, demonstrated by the abrogation of Article 370 and 35A, followed by brutal repression and clampdown with the intent to carry demographic changes, has raised serious questions about India's democratic image in the United States.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the formulation of discriminatory laws aimed against Muslims – Citizenship Amendment Act (2019), National Register of Citizens in Assam, and “Love Jihad” Law (Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance) in 2020 – are a bid to disenfranchise Muslims and discredit minorities, thereby attacking the secular and diverse nature of Indian polity. International community and media have been joining the same course and have condemned the attitude of BJP government towards the issues mentioned above.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, with cow vigilantism on the rise and BJP's racial and communal ideology seeking state patronage, democracy and freedom (especially for minorities) are in jeopardy. Several studies and official reports depict the declining state of Indian democracy under the premiership of Mr. Modi. A think tank funded by the U.S. government, Freedom House, downgraded India's status from the ranks of free nations to partly free nations. The report warned, “... [India] is elevating narrow Hindu nationalist interests at the expense of the founding values of inclusion and equal rights for all.”<sup>29</sup> The report observed that increased

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<sup>27</sup> Akanksha Singh and Roshan Abbas, “Opinion: In the World's Largest Democracy, 'Looking Muslim' could Cost your Life,” CNN, May 19, 2022 <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/19/opinions/indian-muslims-violence-hindu-nationalism-singh-abbas/index.html> and Aproov anand, “India's ‘Love Jihad’ Laws: Another Attempt to Subjugate Muslims,” Al-Jazeera, January 15, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/1/15/indias-love-jihad-laws-another-attempt-to-subjugate-muslims>. and “Citizenship Amendment Bill: India's New 'anti-Muslim' Law Explained,” BBC December 11, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-50670393>.

<sup>28</sup> Akanksha Singh and Roshan Abbas, “Opinion: In the World's Largest Democracy.

<sup>29</sup> “Democracy under Siege,” *Freedom House*, March 4, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>.

pressure on human rights organizations<sup>30</sup>, rising intimidation of academics<sup>31</sup> and journalists,<sup>32</sup> and a spate of bigoted attacks, including lynching<sup>33</sup>, aimed at Muslims show the deterioration of political rights and civil liberties<sup>34</sup> in Modi's India. This, according to the report, could have a damaging impact on global democracy standards.

An annual report of the U.S. State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights, also regretted religious-based violence in India aimed mainly at Muslims. The report also showed concerns about the "curtailment of freedoms and lack of accountability persisting at all government levels."<sup>35</sup> This shows that it will not be possible for the US to remain completely blindfolded towards the developments in India. The US will be forced to accept democratic situation in India as an irritant in their bilateral relations. Similarly, such reports are themselves a reflection of the policy priorities in the US. Furthermore, prominent rights watchdogs have shown serious concerns over India's turn towards authoritarian nationalism with racial and communal underpinnings. Dissent and criticism are facing increasing government repression as the government has intensified its crackdown on protestors and advocates of human rights. Human Rights Watch, for instance, observed, "The Modi government [in 2019] continued its widespread practice of harassing and sometimes prosecuting outspoken human rights defenders and journalists for criticizing government officials and policies."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Murali Krishnan, "Why Is India Cracking down on Human Rights Groups?" DW, October 1, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-is-india-cracking-down-on-human-rights-groups/a-55105954>.

<sup>31</sup> The Wire Staff, "Scholars at Risk Report Details Bleak State of Academic Freedom in India," The Wire, November 25, 2020, <https://thewire.in/education/scholars-at-risk-report-academic-freedom>.

<sup>32</sup> Raju Gopalakrishnan, "Indian Journalists Say They Are Intimidated, Ostracized If They Criticize Modi and the BJP," Reuters, April 27, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/>

<sup>33</sup> "Haunted India's Lynch Files: The Quint Records Incidents of Mob Violence across India since 2015," *The Quint*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.thequint.com/quintlab/lynching-in-india/>.

<sup>34</sup> Prem M. Trivedi, "Is the Modi Government a Threat to Civil Liberties?," *Foreign Policy Magazine*, July 8, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/08/is-the-modi-government-a-threat-to-civil-liberties/>.

<sup>35</sup> "2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: India," *U.S. Department of State*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/india/>.

<sup>36</sup> "World Report 2020: India," *Human Rights Watch*, accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/india>.

Consequently, it seems clear that India's democratic credentials are in a quick decline. The worsening situation of democratic freedoms in India – which has long boasted about being the 'biggest democracy in the world' – could be largely worrisome for the Biden administration, which considers New Delhi a strategic partner and considers the preservation and promotion of democracy important foreign policy goals. Therefore, the deteriorating ideals of democracy in India could complicate the bondage of interests between the two: their attempts to lecture Beijing on human rights and freedoms could appear hypocritical; Biden's urge to preserve and promote democracy globally could be in contradiction with strategic convergence shared with New Delhi; and, America's bid to ally with link-minded democratic states against China in Asia-Pacific could be affected.

### **The Commitment of Biden Administration for Democracy and Human Rights**

A declining condition of India's democracy could turn out to be a predicament for President Joe Biden, who considers authoritarian nationalism and religious populism as serious challenges to democracy worldwide. Though India still has a functional democratic set-up where different institutions are still resisting the efforts by BJP to sabotage the liberal secular spirit of the constitution. However, it is evident from the development since 2014 that Hindu nationalists are prevailing over these institutions and democratic spirit of the society is weakening. One such example is the state elections in UP and other four where BJP was not able to win seats but its electoral presence and vote bank increased from the previous elections.<sup>37</sup> The United States, in the past, has always felt a need to promote and preserve liberal democracy globally, and the Biden administration is no exception: Joe Biden, during his campaign against Trump, never missed out on accusing Trump of 'admiring autocrats' and 'embracing all the thugs in the world.'<sup>38</sup> Moreover, Biden demonstrated a strong ambition to promote and preserve democracy by linking geopolitical objectives to human rights concerns.<sup>39</sup>

An initial foreign policy blueprint, Interim National Security Strategy Guidance, showed Biden administration considering nationalism

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<sup>37</sup> News Desk "Bypolls: Big Setback for BJP as Party Loses in all Four States," India TV, April 16, 2022, <https://www.indiatvnews.com/elections/news/bypoll-results-2022>.

<sup>38</sup> "Biden Criticizes Trump for Embracing all the Thugs in the World," *Independent*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/>.

<sup>39</sup> Joe Biden, "Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference," The White House, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/>.

and authoritarianism as urgent threats which required the preservation of democracy and a coalition of democratic states to uphold American values and ideals.<sup>40</sup> In his first foreign policy address, when Joe Biden stated that “America is back,” he referred to America’s return to diplomacy, multilateralism, and engagement with allies – notions considered by Biden as those rooted in America’s most cherished democratic values.<sup>41</sup> Biden was quick to point out authoritarianism as the first and most crucial challenge for the U.S.; his initial part of the speech was marked by cherishing democratic values: defending freedom, upholding universal rights, and respecting the rule of law. Furthermore, Biden also mentioned his administration’s urge to work with partners to support the restoration of democracy and the rule of law while imposing consequences on those responsible.

Biden’s Secretary of State Antony Blinken, too, showed a deep commitment to helping other states advance democracy and strengthen human rights. Blinken hosted the Summit for Democracy, declaring 2022 the “Year of Action” to “mobilise countries for making significant commitments to enhance their own democracies,” and arguing that pledges for democracy must be followed by concrete action.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Biden’s National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan also showed commitment to arrest democratic backsliding, stating that “the U.S. is going to work to reinforce the strength of democracies and make sure that we show that democracy, rather than autocracy, is the form of government best suited for the challenges of our time.”<sup>43</sup>

With the Biden administration hoping to form a coalition of like-minded liberal states against authoritarianism, the rise of populist nationalism in India could have significant implications for U.S.-India strategic cooperation. When concerns about India’s record on human rights and democratic freedoms are raised, the US will find itself in a tough situation given that Joe Biden’s maiden foreign policy speech demonstrated that Washington appears committed to promoting and

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<sup>40</sup> Joe Biden, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” The White House, March 3, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> Joe Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World,” *U.S. Department of State*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/>.

<sup>42</sup> “Secretary Antony J. Blinken at Virtual Summit for Democracy Civil Society Roundtable - United States Department of State,” *U.S. Department of State*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/>

<sup>43</sup> Amy Mackinnon, “Defining the Biden Doctrine,” *Foreign Policy*, January 18, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/18/>

sustaining democracies.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the declining state of human rights under the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) rule in India could be worrisome for the American State Department, which has doubled down on its criticism of authoritarian practices and the human rights record in China. It is worth noting that in terms of ideological inclination, BJP is closer to the western capitalism and follow pro-West policies at most of the times. This enables them to gain advantage and get away with their anti-democratic policies at home. However, as the battle between liberalism and authoritarianism will intensify, the dilemma for the west will also become more complicated to resolve, particularly when supporting India could threaten the sustenance of the liberal world order itself.

For instance, State Department's annual human rights report has accused China of "crimes against humanity" while mentioning China's treatment of Uighur Muslims as "genocide."<sup>45</sup> Earlier this year, Biden, while responding to queries at a televised event, stated that the "U.S. will reassert its global role in speaking for human rights, and China will pay the price for its human rights abuses."<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, too, constantly points out the geopolitical contest with China while sharing concerns over human rights. For instance, while reminding the world of China being the 'greatest geopolitical test,' he never forgets to press for accountability on human rights abuses, especially in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong.<sup>47</sup> Criticism aimed at China has clearly intensified and has taken a sharp turn towards alleging China more on democracy, freedoms, and human rights issues.

The United States, along with Canada, the United Kingdom, and European Union, has sanctioned a number of Chinese officials for Beijing's mistreatment of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, the US support for democratic Hong Kong has been increasing in the recent years. This, therefore, increases the burden for Washington to not overlook how democratic principles are being jeopardized in India; if the U.S. casts a blind eye on what happens in Beijing's immediate neighbour India – described as a strategic partner to the U.S. – the intense criticism against

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<sup>44</sup> Biden, "Remarks by President on America's Place."

<sup>45</sup> "2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: China," *U.S. Department of State*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/china/>.

<sup>46</sup> "Biden says China to Pay Price for Human Rights Abuses," *Al Jazeera*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/17/>

<sup>47</sup> "China is World's Greatest Geopolitical Test, Blinken Says," *Voice of America News*, accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/china-worlds-greatest-geopolitical-test-blinken-says>.

<sup>48</sup> "Uighur: Western Countries Sanction China over Rights Abuses," *BBC*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56487162>.

Beijing on human rights would lose credibility. In short, the United States would face the age-old dilemma of being accused of lecturing adversaries on democracy meanwhile overlooking authoritarian rulers who are allied for geopolitical necessities.<sup>49</sup>

Hence, a Biden administration considering right-wing authoritarianism and populist nationalism as crucial challenges; intending to establish a collision of like-minded democratic states; affirming the need to promote and preserve democracy globally; and intensifying criticism against Beijing for its policies in Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan, and Hong Kong could raise serious questions on Washington's stance. As to how democracy and human rights face serious threats in India. Strategic convergence between the U.S. and India against China could further enhance cooperation between Washington and New Delhi. However, avenues of collaboration on the geopolitical front could have certain repercussions if the Biden administration remains keen on preserving democracy globally and linking power politics with values and ideals. As Biden announced at Munich Security Council, "democracy does not happen by accident. We have to defend it, fight for it, strengthen it, and renew it."<sup>50</sup>

### **Deteriorating Indian Democracy and Concerns for the United States**

Donald Trump's transactional version of foreign policy did not demonstrate a linkage of human rights and liberal ideals with geopolitical considerations. As Trump overlooked human rights and minority rights records in India, strategic partnership with India grew. For instance, when Trump visited India in February 2020 while making defense deals and receiving a grand tour event (Namaste Trump), the visit coincided with the Delhi Riots, in which Hindu mobs deliberately attacked Muslims after protests were staged in different parts of the country against controversial citizenship laws. Trump, in response, never uttered a word on the killing of fifty-three people (thirty-six of them being Muslims); instead, he regarded Modi as the "Father of the Nation." In India, human rights predicaments evoked little response from Trump's foreign policy team: a free pass was offered to Modi on changing the character of Indian democracy.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Osita G Afoaku, "US Foreign Policy and Authoritarian Regimes: Change and Continuity in International Clientelism," *Journal of Third World Studies* 17, no. 2 (2000): 13-40.

<sup>50</sup> Biden, "Remarks by President at Munich Security Council."

<sup>51</sup> Shivshankar Menon, "League of Nationalists: How Trump and Modi Refashioned the US-Indian Relationship," *Foreign Affairs* 99 (2020): 132, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/>.

Biden, too, is also likely to continue or strengthen the bilateral relationship (as mentioned above), which the U.S. shares with India, since a bipartisan consensus to constrain China is visible in Washington's strategic circles. However, to leave the deteriorating standards of democracy in India unnoticed would be difficult, given the advocacy of liberal principles that Biden has promised throughout his election campaign and in his initial speeches on foreign policy. Some of this could be rhetoric for polls, and some of it could be traditional liberal language in which American foreign policy – even one based on *realpolitik* – is usually encapsulated. Nevertheless, the current U.S. administration's urge to promote coalitions of democratic states while criticizing Beijing's authoritarian practices against human rights could persuade Biden to revisit the stance Washington has on India's domestic politics. Another dimension to this can be the rise of Donald Trump and his authoritarian-styled presidency. His four years tenure followed by the circumstances leading to the mob attack on Capitol Hill brought the US to a situation where the democracy within the US felt threatened. This makes it even more of an imperative for the Biden administration to work for protection of democracy at both home and abroad.

For instance, in his policy paper for Muslim Americans, Biden asked India to restore the rights of Kashmiri citizens while condemning the formulation of the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens.<sup>52</sup> His Vice President Kamala Harris, too, has been vocal on Kashmir: "We have to remind the Kashmiris that they are not alone in the world. We are keeping track of the situation. There is a need to intervene if the situation demands," she said last October.<sup>53</sup> In addition, United States Commission for International Religious Freedom issued an annual report (2020) for India in which India was recommended to be designated as a country of particular concern regarding religious freedoms.<sup>54</sup> It observed that India experienced a drastic turn downward, with religious minorities under increasing assault. The official government commission, whose commissioners are appointed by the president, also recommended targeted sanctions on Indian government agencies and officials responsible.

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<sup>52</sup> "Joe Biden's Agenda for Muslim-American Communities," *Joe Biden Presidential Campaign*, 2020, <https://joebiden.com/muslimamerica/>.

<sup>53</sup> Ayesha Ray, "Kashmir still roiled in conflict," *East Asia Forum Quarterly* 12, no. 4, (2020): 23-26, <https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/informit.590870170195232>.

<sup>54</sup> "India Chapter: Annual Report 2020," *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, April 10, 2021, <https://www.uscirf.gov/countries/india>.

The findings by U.S. government agencies about human rights violations, along with the Biden administration's public commitments to promote democracy and human rights, could force the United States to exert pressure on India over its deteriorating democratic credentials. Although Biden's Secretary of State Antony Blinken has discredited military interventions to promote democracy, an initial foreign policy blueprint, Interim National Security Strategy Guidance, showed Biden's administration considering nationalism and authoritarianism as urgent threats which required the preservation of democracy and a coalition of democratic states to uphold American values and ideals.<sup>55</sup>

Hence, public statements and policy documents show that the Biden administration is more likely to hold India to account for its human rights record. Moreover, during the first telephonic call between Biden and Modi after American President's inauguration, American President underscored his desire to defend democratic institutions and norms worldwide and noted that a shared commitment to democratic values is the bedrock for the U.S.-India relationship. This mention of democratic values is not without a context. Similarly, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's first visit to India was marked by Blinken's veiled criticism of backsliding India's democracy. He, in a joint news conference with Indian external affairs minister S. Jaishankar, said, "We know that we must constantly do more on these fronts [freedom, equality and opportunity to all our people], and neither of us has achieved the ideals we set for ourselves."<sup>56</sup> Hence, his remarks about deteriorating ideals and values during a visit to expand the Indo-U.S. partnership demonstrate that Washington tends not to overlook the human rights record of New Delhi; democracy and human rights are going to be on the agenda along with other strategic matters.

## **Implications for Strategic Partnership**

How much of this moralist expression and commitment would affect American calculations driven by power politics in a bilateral relationship with New Delhi depends upon the extent to which Biden is willing to compromise the realist logic of power maximization for liberal principles of democracy. According to a public intellectual on American foreign policy, John Mearsheimer, U.S. foreign policy is guided by the dictates of realist logic (based on power politics at the expense of liberal ideals and values) and is couched in the language of liberalism (based on the preference for human rights, democracy, and freedoms).<sup>57</sup> If this

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<sup>55</sup> Biden, "Interim National Security Guidance."

<sup>56</sup> "Biden in Veiled Criticism of Indian Democracy," *Dawn*, July 29, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> John J Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton & Company, 2001), 25.

approach is followed by Joe Biden's foreign policy team, U.S.-India strategic partnership will flourish, but at the expense of having a like-minded partner with healthy democracy and freedoms at home.

Moreover, this would also cost the U.S. moral standing and acceptance to condemn and sanction human rights abuses in China. When the Trump administration unleashed a fierce campaign against China's human rights record, criticism came from every side on Washington's policy stance on the deteriorating situation of secularism and inclusivity in India; the U.S. was intensely condemned for double standards.<sup>58</sup> Hence, the intense rhetoric against China's crackdown on minorities and surge towards authoritarianism will have little effectiveness if Biden casts a blind eye on Beijing's immediate neighbour and America's strategic partner. As Mel Gurtov observes that "for U.S. to be more persuasive in urging Beijing to change its direction on human rights, Biden will have to align with Black Lives Matter, respect rule of law, refuse to endorse dictators, and urge the U.S. senate to ratify all the UN conventions on human rights."<sup>59</sup> This means that Washington lacks moral ground to lecture Beijing on human rights while endorsing Narendra Modi next door as human rights violations grow under his watch.

However, despite questions on India's record, the Biden administration "is widely expected to exert more pressure on China in terms of human rights and democracy," writes Xiangfeng Yang.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, America's attempt to counter authoritarian nationalism in the backdrop of a worldwide democratic recession and to rebuild America's image as the leader of the free world would be tested by Washington's stance on declining democratic standards in India. The significance of the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and India persuades many experts on US-India relations to believe that strategic cooperation is likely to continue without any chances of considerations related to democracy and human rights, having the potential to completely jeopardize the convergence between Washington and New Delhi.

However, many believe that Biden would associate geopolitical interests with respect for democratic values and records of human rights. Ashley J. Tellis, a senior fellow at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, believes that "A Biden administration would be different [from

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<sup>58</sup> Wamika Kapur, "India Showcases America's Double Standard," CGTN, July 8, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-07-08/>

<sup>59</sup> Mel Gurtov, "US-China Relations and Human Rights: The Xinjiang Case," *Asian Perspective* 45, no. 1 (2021): 83-90, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/787895/summary>.

<sup>60</sup> Xiangfeng Yang, "US-China Crossroads Ahead: Perils and Opportunities for Biden," *The Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2021): 129-153, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/>

Trump administration] bringing domestic Indian political developments under greater scrutiny and possibly pushback.”<sup>61</sup> A research fellow at Hudson Institute, Aparna Pande, who is also a director of Initiative on the Future of India and South Asia, predicts that “Biden [compare to Trump] would be more willing to speak out on India’s perceived drift towards illiberalism. ... Indians would have to accept that a strategic partnership cannot be completely friction-free.”<sup>62</sup>

Hence, if BJP continues with its majoritarian and divisive policies, Biden could link cooperation with India’s performance on human rights and democratic freedoms. As Anubhav Gupta, associate director of Asia Society Policy Institute, predicts greater scrutiny and public commentary on human rights violations in India but warns that the Biden administration has to walk a tight rope of standing up for democratic ideals while ensuring that it does not alienate important partners like India in the process.<sup>63</sup> However, Biden does not appear to emphasize democratic values and human rights performance to the point where strategic convergence would seem at risk. The reason: to enhance strategic cooperation with India to contain China is a greater and more urgent geopolitical test than setting others’ houses in order. Moreover, as Blinken discredited “costly interventions to promote democracy,” factors like America’s domestic predicaments requiring urgent attention, limited priorities and muscle to engage in domestic politics of other states, and greater strategic necessity to have India as a counterbalance against China would limit Washington’s potential to have greater involvement in India’s domestic affairs. As Chivshankar Menon, former National Security Advisor and Foreign Secretary of India, affirms that Biden would not give Modi a free pass on human rights, yet his “priorities would be domestic.”<sup>64</sup>

The debate so far shows that the US is facing a policy dilemma. On one hand, India with its economic might and geographical proximity to China, vast territory and likeminded ideology is a great source of attraction for the US. On the other hand, the deteriorating state of democracy, human rights and the rise of right-wing Hindu Extremism in

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<sup>61</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, “Pivoting to Biden: The Future of U.S.-India Relations,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 9, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/09/pivoting-to-biden-future-of-u.s.-india-relations-pub-83179>.

<sup>62</sup> Aparna Pande, “Trump or Biden, India-U.S. Strategic Ties Won’t Be Friction-Free,” *The Print*, October 16, 2020, <https://theprint.in/opinion/trump-or-biden-india-us-strategic-ties-wont-be-friction-free/524133/>.

<sup>63</sup> Anubhav Gupta, “Nature And Nurture: How the Biden Administration Can Advance Ties With India,” Asia Society Policy Institute, January 2021, <https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/>

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

India can act as push factors for the US as a non-democratic India will be counter beneficial to the liberal world order. In addition, the phenomenon of populism has started threatening the democracy at home. This is not the first time that the US has been facing this policy dilemma. Historically, the US policy has been getting support from both the aspects, i.e. its strategic and political power as well as the power of its ideology. "The United States has long tried to marry power and principle -- realism and idealism."<sup>65</sup> This uniquely American realism has always been the trademark of American foreign policy. At no point, the US has been conveniently able to completely side-line either of these aspects. Therefore, again the same can be expected that the US will have to redefine its terms of engagement with India if democracy continues to deteriorate there.

## Conclusion

U.S.-India strategic partnership is of great strategic value for Washington and New Delhi with the addition of the China challenge. Nevertheless, it will be very difficult for Biden to overlook India's fast-declining democratic standards, given the Biden administrations urge to make democracy a top foreign policy agenda. Thus, Modi would not enjoy a free pass on democracy and human rights as he did during Trump's era. Yet, there is not much possibility of U.S.-India strategic convergence being at the risk of a greater rift due to Washington's concerns on human rights and democracy: they share more convergences on trade, defense, and China than divergences on values and ideals.<sup>66</sup> However, pressure on New Delhi to ensure minority rights and democratic freedoms would check Modi's reckless drive for Hindu nationalism with some consequences for strategic cooperation. The consequences could not lead to the overturning of strategic cooperation but would certainly affect Biden's envisioning for democracy. America's intense criticism of China's human rights record, as pressing China on human rights while ignoring violations by allies is not a good sign when a coalition of democracies is envisioned to take on China and project yourself different from a transactional predecessor.

With Joe Biden acquiring office after Donald Trump's exit, the U.S.-India strategic cooperation is likely to persist amid growing strategic competition between Washington and Beijing. However, a new administration committed to linking geopolitical objectives

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<sup>65</sup> Condoleezza Rice, "Rethinking the National Interest: American Realism for a New World," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2008, <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/>

<sup>66</sup> Tridivesh Singh Maini, "The U.S.-India Relationship after Trump: A Return to Convention?" *Future Directions International*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.futuredirections.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/The-US-India-Relationship-after-Trump-A-Return-to-Convention.pdf>.

with consideration for human rights and democracy would find it increasingly difficult to counter authoritarian nationalism, promote a coalition of democratic states, and allege China of human rights violations while overlooking the declining standards of democracy in India. Hence, the U.S. under the Biden administration is expected to exert more pressure on India regarding its human rights record and declining credentials of democracy. Yet, divergence on the issues of human rights and democracy could not lead to parting, as balancing Chinese power and strengthening alliances are more urgent foreign policy goals for an administration that has discredited interventions to promote democracy.

