



India

Assessment: Fair

Trend: ↑

Capital: New Delhi

Type of Government: Federal Republic

Head of Government: Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (since 19 March 1998)

Minister of External Affairs: Yashwant Sinha

Population: 1,029,991,145

Human Development Index Ranking 2002: 124

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

India, the world's most populous democracy, has compiled only a **fair** record of support for democracy abroad between 1992 and 2002, but has shown improvement in the past few years. New Delhi has not made democracy promotion beyond its own national borders a priority of Indian foreign policy. Its leadership in the non-aligned movement has given India a highly visible platform from which to champion an agenda for the developing world but one that for a long time was conspicuously silent on matters of democracy and human rights. For the most part, successive Indian governments have demonstrated little interest in criticizing transgressions of democracy and human rights norms and practices in other countries, perhaps because of residual sensitivities stemming from its own shortcomings in this sphere. India has begun to adopt a more active stance on democracy issues in international fora and its swift and firm response to the military coup in neighboring, nuclear-armed Pakistan was at least in part motivated by a belief that democracy will advance the cause of regional stability in the sub-continent.

The Indian government does not have an agency dedicated to developing expertise to monitor or support democratic trends across the world. Its primary focus has been in the South Asia region. While it is acutely aware of the threat to regional stability and its own security posed by weak democratic institutions in the surrounding countries, India has not made a strong push to promote democratic practices and values in the neighborhood. A small amount of bilateral economic aid, (e.g. to Nepal) and military intervention in Sri Lanka cannot credibly be claimed as attempts to advance democratic goals as New Delhi has tried to do in the past. Indeed, the Indian government appears to be placing greater emphasis on fostering economic ties with neighboring countries, regardless of the nature of their systems of government. This is particularly true with respect to India's evolving relations with members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), some of which remain highly repressive societies. On the other hand, India has become a more active player in regional organizations that respond to threats to democracy, such as the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group.

FOREIGN RELATIONS BACKGROUND

Any discussion of Indian foreign policy must begin with its relations with Pakistan, a nuclear-armed neighbor with whom India has fought three wars and engaged in countless other border skirmishes since both countries achieved independence. Most knowledgeable observers believe that the failure to come to a mutually-acceptable agreement on the future of Kashmir, the object of almost all of the cross-border violence for five decades, dooms the two countries to perpetual rivalry, possibly escalating to armed conflict, a nightmare scenario given both sides possession of nuclear weapons.

The 1999 coup in Pakistan, a development examined throughout this essay, has further exacerbated



tensions on the Asian subcontinent. The Indian government has bluntly stated its preference to deal with a democratic counterpart and has little confidence that the Musharraf government, despite intense pressure from the United States, has the political will to stop incursions by Islamic militants and Kashmiri separatists.

While India historically has sought to influence the evolution of the international political system through its vigorous diplomacy on behalf of the developing world, its limited economic and military capacity has continued to steer Indian foreign policy toward South Asia, a region with its share of formidable challenges. Throughout the 1990s, India has sought greater regional economic and geo-strategic prominence.¹ New Delhi tempered its arguably hegemonic ambitions with lofty democratic and development discourse, but its goal of establishing a sphere of influence to check Pakistani and Chinese influence is unmistakable.

Sharing borders with six countries with ethnic, communal and linguistic overlaps, India has grown wary of the “contagion effect” of nearby repressive regimes.² New Delhi has taken some steps to assist in the political transformation of surrounding countries. Its relatively small bilateral assistance program contributed to Nepal’s democratic transition, however fragile. This, in turn, created an important strategic buffer zone of democratic stability between India and China. The ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka, which now shows signs of coming to an end, has also been a concern to Indian policymakers. The Indian government has opted to maintain a low profile in working for a truce between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil separatists after its disastrous military mission to bring peace to the island in the mid-1980s. India also intervened militarily in the Maldives in 1988 after an attempted overthrow of the democratically-elected government by armed militias.

Border tensions with China remain, although the overall rivalry between the Asian giants is today more economic and political than military in nature. India has chosen to foster closer links with China even as New Delhi attempts to blunt the expansion of Chinese influence in the region. Beijing’s establishment of naval bases in Burma³ prompted India to pursue a strategy of constructive engagement with repressive neighbors, including Burma.

In Afghanistan, India provided covert logistical aid to the Northern Alliance while it fought the ruling Taliban throughout the 1990s. A large number of Afghani refugees and political expatriates

were given shelter in India, and the Indian government responded generously to the fall of the Taliban, pledging \$10 million for immediate economic, humanitarian and technical assistance to the country for its post-conflict reconstruction.⁴ India’s “look East” policy⁵ is also geared towards integration into the ASEAN community, a region where democratic norms, practices and mechanisms are underdeveloped.

The focus on the Asian theater is not to say that India has lacked for larger ambitions on the international stage. Since independence, India’s leaders have sought and often attracted an international audience, abetted by the country’s singular role in the non-aligned movement and the so-called Group of 77. More recently, India has waged a campaign to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. One of the original signatories of the UN Charter in 1945 and still an ardent backer of the body, India today is the second largest source of troops for various UN peacekeeping missions in Africa and Asia⁶ and an extremely engaged actor in all manner of UN activities and programs.

RESPONSE TO OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY-ELECTED GOVERNMENTS

India’s reaction to the overthrow of democratically-elected governments has been immediate and strident in some cases and more muted in others. Specifically, India played an active role in rallying both the Commonwealth and the United Nations to condemn coups and impose sanctions on military regimes in both Fiji and Pakistan. India also supported the unprecedented suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth following the execution of opposition leader Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others in 1995. New Delhi clearly had an overriding interest in focusing international attention on the overthrow of civilian government in Pakistan and securing broad support for efforts to restore democratic rule.

India’s response to the coup in Fiji in 2000 was a test of the values and principles to which New Delhi claimed allegiance. The outcome of the unconstitutional seizure of power in tiny Fiji was not itself of strategic significance to India but it felt obliged to act in the case given the sizable ethnic Indian population on the island and the fact that the ousted democratically-elected president, Mahendra Chaudhry, was of Indian descent. Pressure built on the Ministry of External Affairs to respond with



some sort of limited military intervention, as coup leader George Speight appealed to the native Fijians to back him against the allegedly exploitative Indian minority community. But unlike the Maldives a decade earlier, Fiji was not in the immediate region. Eschewing the military option, India worked closely with Australia to put pressure on the new regime to restore the constitution as soon as possible and pressed the Commonwealth's Ministerial Action Group and ASEAN to suspend bilateral ventures with Fiji as long as the coup plotters remained in power.

Predictably, India's response to General Musharraf's bloodless coup in Pakistan in 1999 was swift and hard-hitting. The overthrow of the Sharif government, which had lost much of its popular support because of endemic corruption and mismanagement, was especially disappointing because the two sides had made headway in direct negotiations on a number of important bilateral issues, including the long-standing dispute over Kashmir. The Indian government understood that the ineffective and corrupt Sharif government no longer had broad-based support but this did not dissuade New Delhi from spearheading a campaign to enlist the support of the international community to isolate the military regime (for example, through suspension from the Commonwealth) and push for democratic restoration. India's efforts to mobilize world opinion to isolate the Musharraf regime suffered a major setback in the aftermath of September 11th when the U.S., already wary of holding security and economic interests in South Asia hostage to democratic restoration in Pakistan, stifled any criticism of the government that had become pivotal in the global war on terrorism.

Irregular democratic transitions in the Philippines and Indonesia were not central to the Indian foreign policy establishment.

RESPONSE TO MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES

India has not reacted strongly to the manipulation of democratic elections abroad. Although it has sent electoral monitors to transitional African and Asian states at the request of the UN, India has not openly condemned electoral irregularities in other countries. India has instead asserted the need to respect every country's "territorial integrity and sovereignty." This position may be partially explained by India's own apprehension over how other democracies view its claim in Kashmir and its need to defend against

international criticisms of human rights violations in that territory.

The controversial 1998 elections in Cambodia coincided with an escalation in tensions between India and Pakistan as a result of both countries' testing of nuclear weapons. As such, India's diplomatic efforts were at the time focused on responding to widespread international criticism for going through with the testing, despite calls not to. However, India did join the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) statement supporting reports that the voting process was generally peaceful and recognizing the elections as an important step towards enhancing peace and stability in Cambodia.⁷

India responded to Zimbabwe's 2002 election crisis as a member of the Commonwealth, within which it had just been appointed to the Ministerial Action Group (CMAG). While it did not use this new leadership position to directly respond to the election violence, it did join the CMAG decision to suspend Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth for one year.

PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

India has been a relatively strong supporter of democracy promotion in international fora, particularly in the UN, a body in which India has historically exercised considerable influence in large part because of its leadership of the non-aligned movement. Long a powerful voice on development as well as nuclear and alternative security issues, India has shown increasing willingness to become involved in democracy-related efforts in regional and global institutions.

Moreover, successive Indian governments have also consciously held up the country as a model for the Third World to show that development and democracy can proceed together, an achievement celebrated by the UN in its annual Human Development Report for the year 2000.⁸ Any visitor to India will note that elites and ordinary citizens alike take pride in the country being the world's most populous democracy and maintaining that course despite enormous challenges that have overwhelmed many nascent democracies.⁹ And while India remains a comparatively poor if rapidly modernizing country that cannot devote substantial resources to democracy promotion programming internationally, it has tried to support with modest amounts of funding some activities in Nepal and other countries designed to strengthen democratic institutions. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs



annual reports 1998-2002, this support has been focused on economic development projects, e.g., infrastructure projects and technical cooperation, as well as maintaining peace and stability.

Recent Indian governments also have been more inclined to support democracy and human rights resolutions at the UN, suggesting that New Delhi does not regard its shared interests with developing countries as precluding more vigorous support for internationally recognized norms in this area. However, India does remain sensitive about its human rights record, which has come under scrutiny from Western governments and civil society activists at home and abroad, particularly with regard to Kashmir and to safeguarding rights of Muslims and other minority communities.

In another example of India's more visible involvement in international democracy efforts, the government has been a member of the steering committee of the Community of Democracies initiative and in that capacity has helped to organize the Warsaw and upcoming Seoul ministerial conferences. India also played host to an important non-governmental conference of the World Movement for Democracy, an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).¹⁰ The 1999 conference in New Delhi, which was organized by NED and the influential Confederation of Indian Industry, brought together participants from across the world to discuss ways to reinvigorate national and transnational civil society networks.

The Commonwealth of former British colonies has been notably more active in defending and promoting democracy around the world and India has been central to many of the major policy initiatives related to coups in Pakistan, Fiji and elsewhere. New Delhi has supported sanctions imposed by the organization and by the UN, but is generally very reluctant to take such steps unilaterally. On the other hand, it has made no apparent effort to incorporate democracy-related concerns in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, a grouping in which India dominates.

In some of its newer bilateral relations, India has been actively aiding Cambodia's uneasy transition to democracy. The Indian government provided Cambodia with a sizable loan and aid package of \$15 million and various training programs surrounding its admission to ASEAN and offered the services of the Indian judicial system, in the event that the UN decided to withdraw from the Khmer Rouge human rights trial.

In the context of establishing closer relations with the Indonesian government, India has strongly encouraged further democratic reform, a message carried by Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee during high-profile visits to the new democracy and largest Muslim majority country in the world.

It is also important to point out that for decades India has been the home-in-exile of Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. The issue of Tibet and specifically, India's granting asylum to many, who have fled Chinese repression in the kingdom, has been a source of friction in bilateral relations with Beijing.

POLICY TOWARDS ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS

Throughout the 1990s, India's policy toward entrenched dictatorships was governed by geo-strategic interests that left little room for democracy-related considerations. In a move that was designed to counter growing Chinese influence in South Asia and adjoining areas, India moved its policy away from isolating or simply ignoring unfriendly authoritarian regimes in the direction of greater engagement. In doing so, already weak democracy promotion motives were further marginalized or discarded altogether in the deliberations of Indian policymakers. In the case of Burma, for example, India initially harshly condemned the military junta that prevented the winner of democratic elections, Aung San Suu Kyi, from taking office. When the staying power of the military dictatorship became more evident, as did the suffering of the Burmese people, New Delhi toned down its criticism and sought an accommodation with the repressive military rulers. The Indian government was also apprehensive about growing Chinese influence in Burma and the Indo-China corridor. Today, it is the largest market for Burma's exports¹¹ and also runs technical training programs in the country.

India has similarly decided that in the case of China, New Delhi's regional interests are best served by a policy of rapprochement with Beijing. For decades, China attempted to counter-balance Indian military power through a close relationship with Pakistan. Cordial relations with China are seen in New Delhi as essential to extend India's regional influence. As a result, India has refrained from citing China's poor record on human rights and democracy and even the issue of Tibet seems to have fallen off India's bilateral and multilateral agenda.

With regard to Pakistan, there is no question that the Indian government very much wants



democracy to be restored and believes that the prospects for long-term stability in bilateral relations depend on it. At the same time, policymakers in New Delhi feel India has no real choice but to deal with the Musharraf regime given the possibility of armed conflict and a host of other critical issues. They also concluded that no moderate alternative is likely to come to power any time soon. Former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif have both been banished from the country and/or largely

discredited for their own inept and corrupt rule. India does try to apply low level pressure on the Pakistani regime to restore democracy. Accordingly, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs continues to monitor Musharraf's progress on his promise to return democracy to Pakistan, and India can be expected to criticize measures by Musharraf to weaken the Pakistani constitution and solidify his power.

¹ For more, see: Cohen, Stephen. India: Emerging Power. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2001.

² As witnessed in the democratic movement in East Pakistan in 1970-71 where a military regime cracked down on ethnic Bengalis and India had to intervene militarily as hundreds of thousands of crossed over to India and threatened to destabilize the entire region. This resulted in the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan. Similarly, the civil war in Sri Lanka has caused a substantial number of Tamils to flee towards South India exacerbating ethnic tensions and natural resource pressures.

³ Pant, N.K. Regional Center for Strategic Studies. "Need to Mend Fences With Neighbors." Article No. 558. Colombo, Sri Lanka: 1 Sep. 2001.

⁴ Press statement released by the Indian Embassy in Washington, DC on 27 Feb. 2002. Statement on Areas of Cooperation between India and Afghanistan on Reconstruction and Rehabilitation in post-conflict Afghanistan. www.indianembassy.org/South_Asia/afghanistan/afghan_feb_27_02.html.

⁵ Former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral in a previous stint as the external affairs minister in the mid-1990s had urged the 'need to revitalize Indian foreign policy's economic dimension' (from speech at the Council of Foreign Relations, New York, on 3 Oct. 1996. This initiative has since energized the urge to reassess and explore new bilateral economic potentials with the Middle East, Southeast Asian 'tiger' economies and the vast energy and mineral resources of Central Asia.

⁶ "A History of Indian Participation in UN Peacekeeping Missions."

http://www.indianembassy.org/policy/Peace_Keeping/history_india_UN_peace_keeping.htm.

⁷ "ARF Welcomes 'Generally Peaceful' Elections in 'Cambodia.'" Xinhua News Agency 27 July 1998.

⁸ United Nations. Human Development Report. New York: 2000. <hrdc.undp.org.in/hdrepost2000>; Deccan Herald (New Delhi) 30 June 2000.

⁹ Apart from a brief period of absolute power exercised by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in-between 1975 to 1977; she declared a state of emergency and banned all opposition parties. Subsequently deciding to hold democratic elections, she lost by a heavy margin.

¹⁰ More information including the charter, aims and operational framework can be found at: www.wmd.org.

¹¹ Allison, Tony. "Burma Shows India the Road to Southeast." Asia Times Online 21 Feb. 2001. www.atimes.com/reports/CB21Ai01.html.