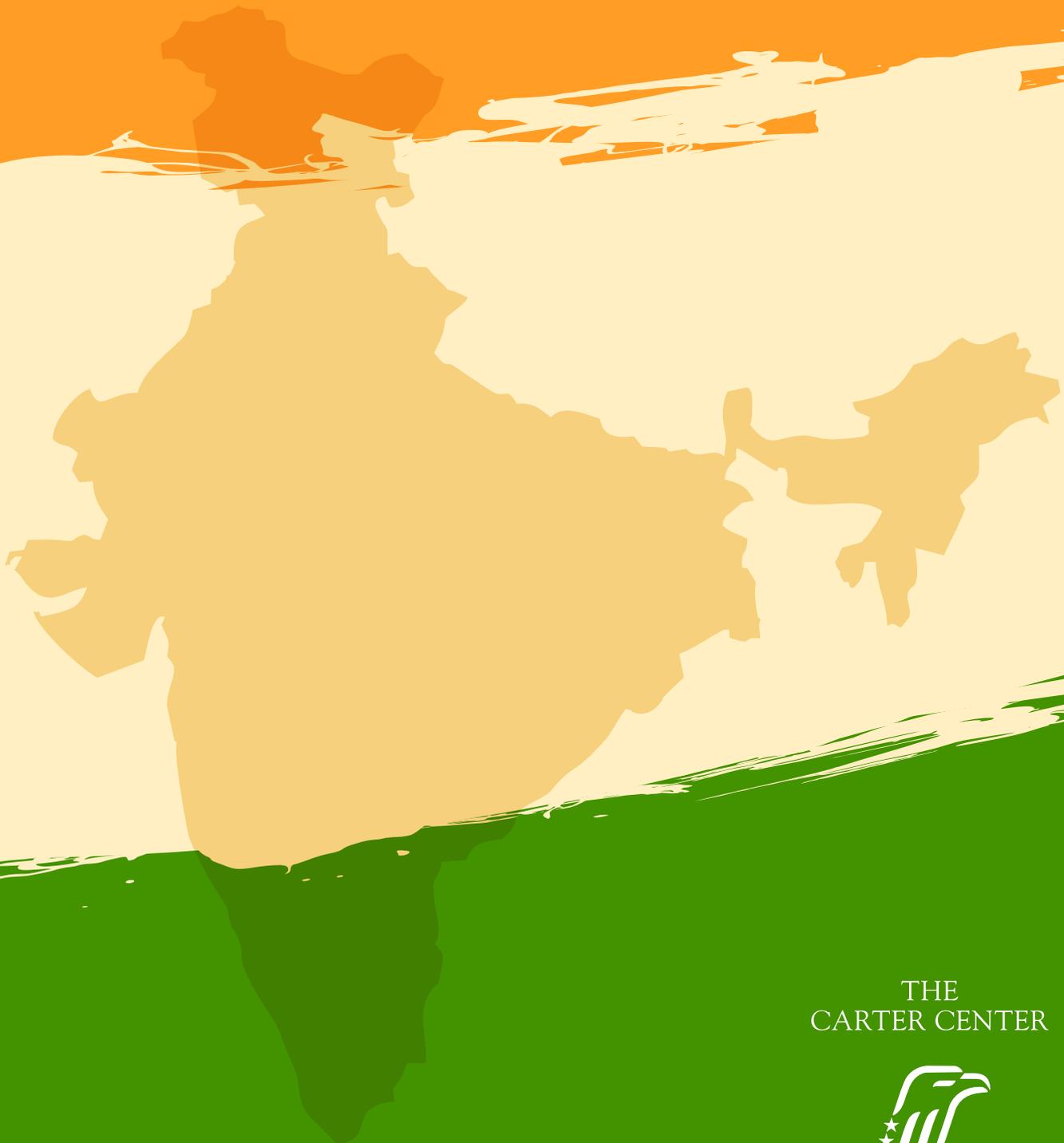


INDIA POLICY
COMMENTARY

Democracy Promotion in a Time of War

By Bann Seng Tan
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In the Russo-Ukrainian War, we have witnessed a small coalition of liberal democracies confront an authoritarian Russia. The decision by a third group of countries to sit this conflict out is striking. One such country, India, has consistently avoided condemnation of Russia in the United Nations. India also has taken advantage of Western sanctions to buy Russian energy at a discount. While much has been made of the [historical ties](#) between India and Russia, we need not look far to understand India's ambivalence: Recent concerns around Indian democracy are well [known](#). Authoritarian regimes are simply less invested in the rules-based international order than liberal democracies.

Against such an adverse international backdrop, can the West still use foreign aid to promote democracy? Democracy promotion is feasible, even under the shadow of war, but only if we are realistic in our approach. What does this suggest for the case of India?

Democracy Promotion in General

To build a strategy for democracy promotion using state-to-state foreign aid, we should understand the imperatives of both donors and recipients. Foreign aid is not altruistic; donors use aid to pursue a variety of objectives. Firstly, they might seek strategic concessions with aid. Consider, for example, American aid to Egypt during Hosni Mubarak's reign: Then, the U.S. was using aid to buy Egyptian peace with Israel. Secondly, donors might pursue commercial concessions with aid as in Chinese aid to select African countries such as Angola that happen to be rich in the mineral and oil resources the Chinese economy needs. Thirdly, donors could also seek to use their leverage over foreign aid to apply diplomatic pressure on authoritarian aid recipients to protect human rights, to promote the rule of law, and to democratize. [Empirical studies](#) of aid-giving have shown that this is a tertiary concern for donors. The July 2022 [visit](#) by President Joe Biden to Saudi Arabia despite its poor human rights record is a case in point. Saudi help with energy supplies is simply more important to the U.S. than the human rights of Saudi dissidents. When we have a choice, the data shows we tend to prioritize strategic and commercial concessions that recipients offer over the democratization of the same recipients.

The View of the Recipient

Compounding this is the fact that the political reforms that we want to see enacted are politically painful for the would-be authoritarian recipient. Which self-respecting dictator will give up power voluntarily if he can help it? The autocrat has three responses. First, he could walk away, but that is not in his best interests since he loses access to the aid money he seeks. If he wants that aid, the second response is to make a grand bargain with the West, offering in exchange some other policy concessions — that is, besides democratization — that the West values. The third response is to seek an alternative patron like China, which may offer the desired aid without requiring democratization. The catch is to realize that the alternative patron will also seek policy concessions for its aid. This reduces this scenario to a variant of the second response.

Not all recipients are equal. Some, like Fiji, lack the attributes to make meaningful counteroffers to Western donors. They can try to look for alternative patrons but are unlikely to succeed because they do not have much to offer to them in the first place. Because they lack leverage, they can be persuaded to liberalize, maybe even democratize, with foreign aid. A strategy of aid allocation that filters recipients by their leverage and emphasizes those recipients that are more susceptible to Western pressure is the way forward. "[Liberalization at the margins](#)," as it were.

The corollary is that recipients with strategic and commercial value to the West will have leverage. They can use it to deflect Western pressure to democratize. These recipients — think of them as the “Egypt” of the aid-recipient world — historically got away with non-democratization. India is an illustrative example.

The case of India

The West’s immediate priority is to defeat Russia, with a view to the coming struggle with China. It does not want closer ties between India and Russia in the short run, and it seeks Indian cooperation against China in the long run. Economically, India is Asia’s [third-largest economy](#) with high economic growth rates, and it has a large population whose [size](#) is projected to overtake China’s. This combination of commercial and strategic attributes gives Modi’s regime leverage against the West. It explains why the West has been conspicuously silent on Indian democratic backsliding. Until we, the people, learn to value the liberty of others as much as we value strategic and commercial benefits that an authoritarian India has to offer, Indian democrats are out of luck. Until then, the West is better served by focusing on countries with [weak leverage](#), like Sri Lanka, Laos, Pakistan, Maldives, and Bangladesh, instead.

If, however, we insist on fighting the good fight, how might we go about encouraging minor policy change in India? First, treat each policy deal with authoritarian India as purely transactional. Instead of appealing to liberal values — which autocrats do not care about — appeal to the autocrats’ own self-interests. For instance, one reason India is reluctant to criticize Russia is because it buys a lot of Russian weapons. The Russo-Ukrainian War is a battlefield test of Western versus Russian weaponry. Both India and Turkey sought to buy the Russian S-400 air defense system despite the risk of U.S. sanctions. When Russia cannibalizes its existing stocks of equipment to continue the war, it reduces its ability to service existing and future arms contracts with international clients. India, by [cancelling](#) its recent order of Russian KA-31 helicopters, may have realized that under Western sanctions, there are only so many Russian spare parts to go around. Data collected by Western intelligence on the Russian technical failures and the supply chain issues should be provided to the Indian army. India’s military leaders may rethink their reliance on Russian weaponry and agitate for better and more reliable sources of arms (such as the U.S.).

Second, the West still has some comparative advantage. Kleptocrats need a place to store their illicit wealth. They want their yachts and their vacations in the West. They want prestigious education for their children. The reaction of the Russian elites when they can no longer enjoy their luxury goods is telling. It is no secret that millions of Indians want their children to receive an Ivy League education. The West should look to this as an asset to leverage. Autocrats may not care about the lack of educational opportunities for the masses, but they will when their relatives are directly affected. Just be prepared for the inevitable backlash.

The Russo-Ukrainian War is revitalizing the prospect of a coalition of liberal democracies for liberal democracy; but that is true only if we play our cards right. The best use of our limited political capital is to emphasize the recipients that lack leverage. For those like India that do

have leverage, we may have to be creative given the limitations. The alternative, a world of resurgent authoritarianism run amok, is much worse.

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Bann-Seng Tan is Assistant Professor at Ashoka University. He is the author of [*Aid and Democracy Promotion: Liberalization at the Margins*](#), published in 2020.

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One Copenhill
453 John Lewis Freedom Parkway
Atlanta, GA 30307
(404) 420-5100

www.cartercenter.org