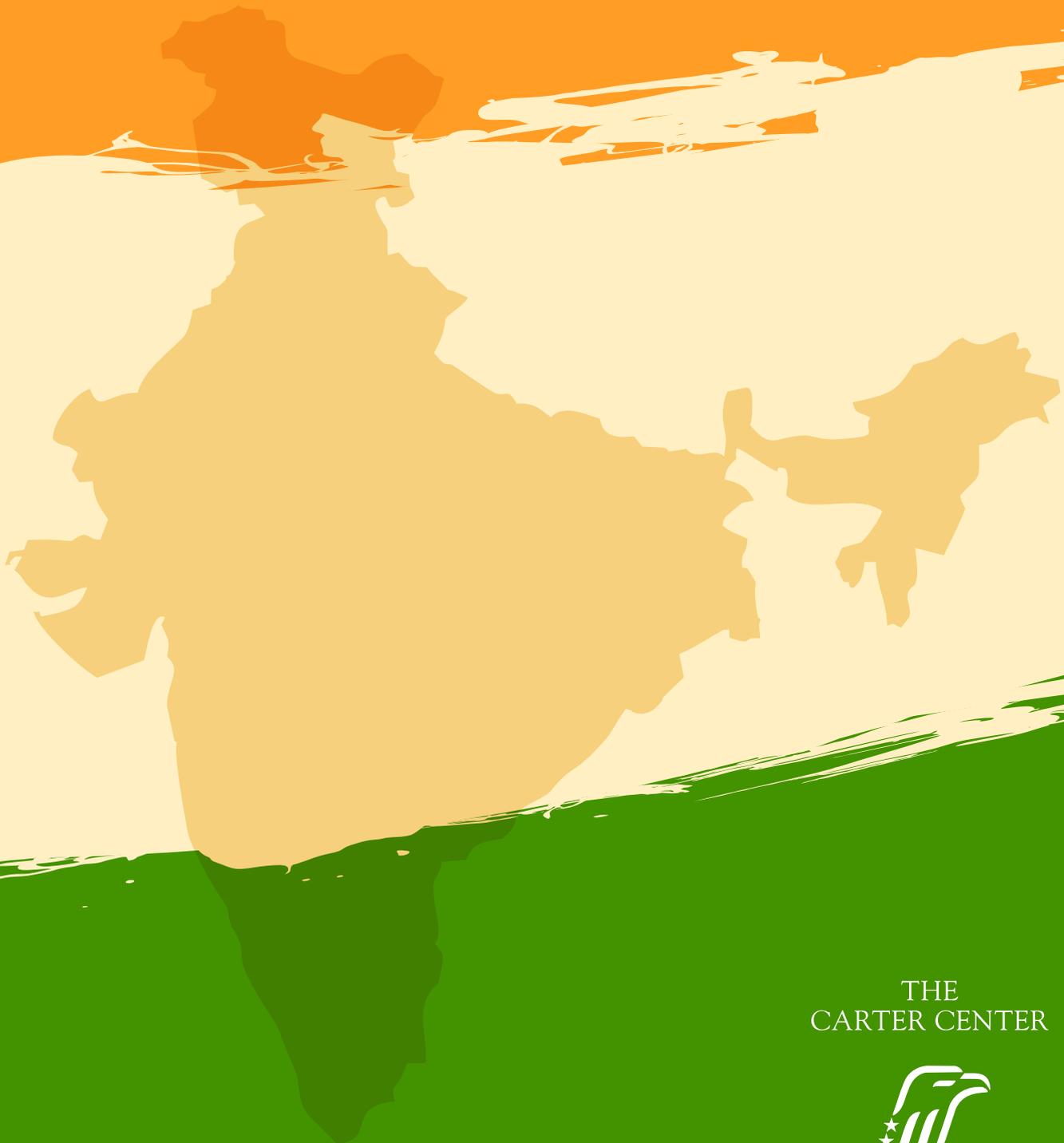


INDIA POLICY
COMMENTARY

Indian Democracy in Strategic Perspective: Q&A with Sushant Singh

By Sushant Singh
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What does India's position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine mean for the balance of global politics? In this interview, Sushant Singh, senior fellow at the Center for Policy Research, shares his perspective on current risks to Indian democracy and how these shifts may affect U.S. strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific. Drawing on his extensive career in the Indian army, Singh remarks on recent shifts in civil-military relations in India. Singh also sheds light on how China may view India's response to Ukraine, the future of the India-China relationship, and what rising illiberalism in India may mean for the stability of South Asia writ large.

India Policy: Before becoming a policy analyst, you served in the Indian army for over 20 years. Last month, the press relations officer for the Ministry of Defense in Jammu tweeted pictures of an iftar celebration organized by the army in the Doda district, noting that the officers were "keeping alive the traditions of #secularism." The tweet was later taken down after being trolled by Hindu nationalist sympathizers, such as the editor-in-chief of Sudarshan News, Suresh Chavhanke, who said the "disease [of secularism] has now spread even into the army." This is a rare instance of a military institution caving to external pressure.

With experts' concerns about rising illiberalism in India, have you noticed changes in the functioning or public posture of the Indian military?

Singh: Indian armed forces have always taken great pride in their secular and multiethnic nature, which is aligned with the values enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The deletion of the tweet was therefore a striking gesture by the army PRO, effectively kowtowing to pressure by fundamentalist forces. When that happens in India's only Muslim-majority region of Jammu and Kashmir, it makes the impact far worse.

Visibly, one would be hard-pressed to find incidents of gross overt changes in the behavior of the Indian military. However, I am reminded of the late Gen. Bipin Rawat's choice to skip Indian Navy Day in order to appear as chief guest at a Hindu nationalist function in Gorakhpur, as well as a recent video of a ceremonial parade where Hindu devotional songs and practices were used in place of secular army traditions. Both incidents went viral and were [remarked upon](#) by retired military officers such as Lt. Gen. H.S. Panag, Adm. L. Ramdas, and [Commodore C. Uday Bhaskar](#).

India Policy: Shared views about China's role in the Indo-Pacific appear to have brought the U.S. and India closer together on matters of defense and economic cooperation. Where India is concerned, the Chinese incursion in Ladakh has further strained Indo-Chinese ties that have already been weakening since the early 2000s due to skirmishes along the Line of Actual Control and disputed activities in the South China Sea. This ebb in Indo-Chinese ties is also marked by increasing political consolidation — within China under President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party, as well as within India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party. The nature and consequences of this

consolidation appear to be different in the two countries. For China, some [associate](#) a centralized party under Xi with a more muscular foreign policy and bolstered its Chinese [military](#) and [economic](#) power.

For India, however, [scholars note](#) that increasing centralization of power at the national level has occurred at the expense of federalism and of independent democratic institutions. Further, political centralization in India has not accrued benefits, either to the Indian economy or to the country's national security. On the contrary, there is the sense that the emerging model of governance in India has actually exposed the country to *greater* risks — though the allure of a more authoritarian polity remains attractive for some Indians.

How might the Chinese perceive India's recent democratic backsliding? In what ways is China's increased aggressive posture vis-à-vis India taking advantage of this backsliding?

Singh: The backsliding of democracy in India only validates and reaffirms Beijing's ideological view that a liberal democracy is incapable of delivering in a big country. This is an argument they have made for a long time. They would also like to use this backsliding in India to attract Delhi closer to Beijing because, unlike Washington, Beijing is never going to criticize India for human rights violations, the suppression of democratic norms, or ill treatment of religious and ethnic minorities. The Chinese may not explicitly state it, but if President Biden is characterizing the current global state of affairs as a war between democracy and authoritarianism, Beijing would be more than happy to have the West not classify India as a democracy. That would mean that India, one of the world's largest countries, is not within the Western model, as it always has been. Therefore, it adds weight to Beijing's argument that the Chinese model is a better alternative.

The increasingly aggressive posture of China is not directly linked to democratic backsliding in India, but it does take advantage of India's weaknesses, which have become manifest in the past eight years. Authoritarian rulers do not have honest feedback mechanisms, which often leaves them short of good advice. In India's case, that has been coupled with the decline of India's soft power in the region. With its current policies in Kashmir, Delhi is unlikely to criticize Chinese actions in Xinjiang – in fact, India has taken a very mild stance toward the Chinese crackdown in Hong Kong. That is but one kind of indirect advantage that China is garnering from India's democratic decline.

India Policy: Despite ongoing conflict along the border, India remains reluctant to criticize Beijing publicly or endanger the growing trade ties between China and India. In [an April 2022 article for The Hindu](#), you wrote about the potential for the Ukraine crisis to “reset” Sino-Indian relations in a way that could fundamentally alter the U.S.-India relationship. How would democratic backsliding in India figure into your argument here? What does India's stance on Russia signal to you about the future of India's relationship with China?

Singh: There is little rational reason for India to maintain cordial relations with China and to keep the United States at arm's length, except that Delhi doesn't wish to lose its strategic sovereignty. China presents a strategic threat and espouses values that India constitutionally stands opposed to, and thus a natural partnership would be with the U.S.

However, it goes back to the West's scrutiny of India's erosion of democratic norms and treatment of religious minorities, which makes Modi's government uncomfortable. That is something China

is never going to do. It welcomed Modi, then chief minister of Gujarat, when Western countries had denied him a visa for his role in the 2002 Gujarat riots.

India's stance on Russia signals that it is comfortable dealing with countries that are not democracies as long as that serves Indian interests. There is no values-based idea driving Indian policy that puts non-democracies on the opposite side as adversaries. It means India will have a relationship with China based on its strategic interests, which may not always align with the U.S.

India Policy: There is a common perception that India is the exemplar of democracy in South Asia, whereas Pakistan has often been framed as a military-led technocracy. In recent years, however, some experts have begun [to analogize the prospects](#) for India's political trajectory to the Pakistani experience. They point to risks in India's civil-military relations, rising religious fundamentalism, and the resulting diminishing returns to the economy as three examples of how India should avoid the pitfalls Pakistan has historically faced. Concerns also abound as to how democratic backsliding in India may affect stability in the South Asian subcontinent, not least of all in India-Pakistan ties.

How do you see recent developments in Indian democracy affecting geopolitics in the region? What should American policymakers understand about the relationship between India and Pakistan where democracy in the region is concerned? How can a stronger Indian democracy support peace and prosperity in South Asia?

Singh: Indian democracy was the exemplar in the region, which added to the country's overall attractiveness for the U.S. as a counter to China's hard-power policies in South Asia. In addition to creating friction between India and the United States, the rise of Hindutva majoritarianism in India has also made neighboring countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh uncomfortable. For example, with the recent passage of the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act, politicians from the ruling party in India [publicly castigated](#) these Muslim-majority countries for the persecution of religious minorities and even encouraged Christians, Sikhs, and Buddhists from surrounding countries to migrate to India as refugees. This increasingly hostile posture has made the region unfriendly toward India, making it more difficult to counter the Chinese challenge.

American policymakers should know that as India and Pakistan become more authoritarian, the risk of a nuclear confrontation between them is higher today than in past decades. The risks were made evident after the [Balakot strike of 2019](#) and have been underscored by Indian government officials. The antagonistic relationship between India and Pakistan poses dangers to both countries, the region, and the whole world.

By being receptive to feedback and implementing inclusive values, a stronger Indian democracy will de-escalate points of conflict with its neighbors and strengthen regional cooperation.

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Sushant Singh is senior fellow at the Centre for Policy Research. Previously, Singh was a lecturer in political science at Yale University and the deputy editor of The Indian Express, reporting on strategic affairs, national security, and international affairs. He won the prestigious Ramnath Goenka Prize for Excellence in Journalism for 2017 and 2018. Prior to becoming a journalist, he served in the Indian army for two decades, including multiple stints in Jammu and Kashmir. It also included a tenure as United Nations military observer with the United Nations peacekeeping operations in Cote d'Ivoire. He is the author of "Mission Overseas: Daring Operations by the Indian

Military” (Juggernaut Books, 2017) and co-author of “Note by Note: The India Story 1947-2017” (HarperCollins India, 2018).

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