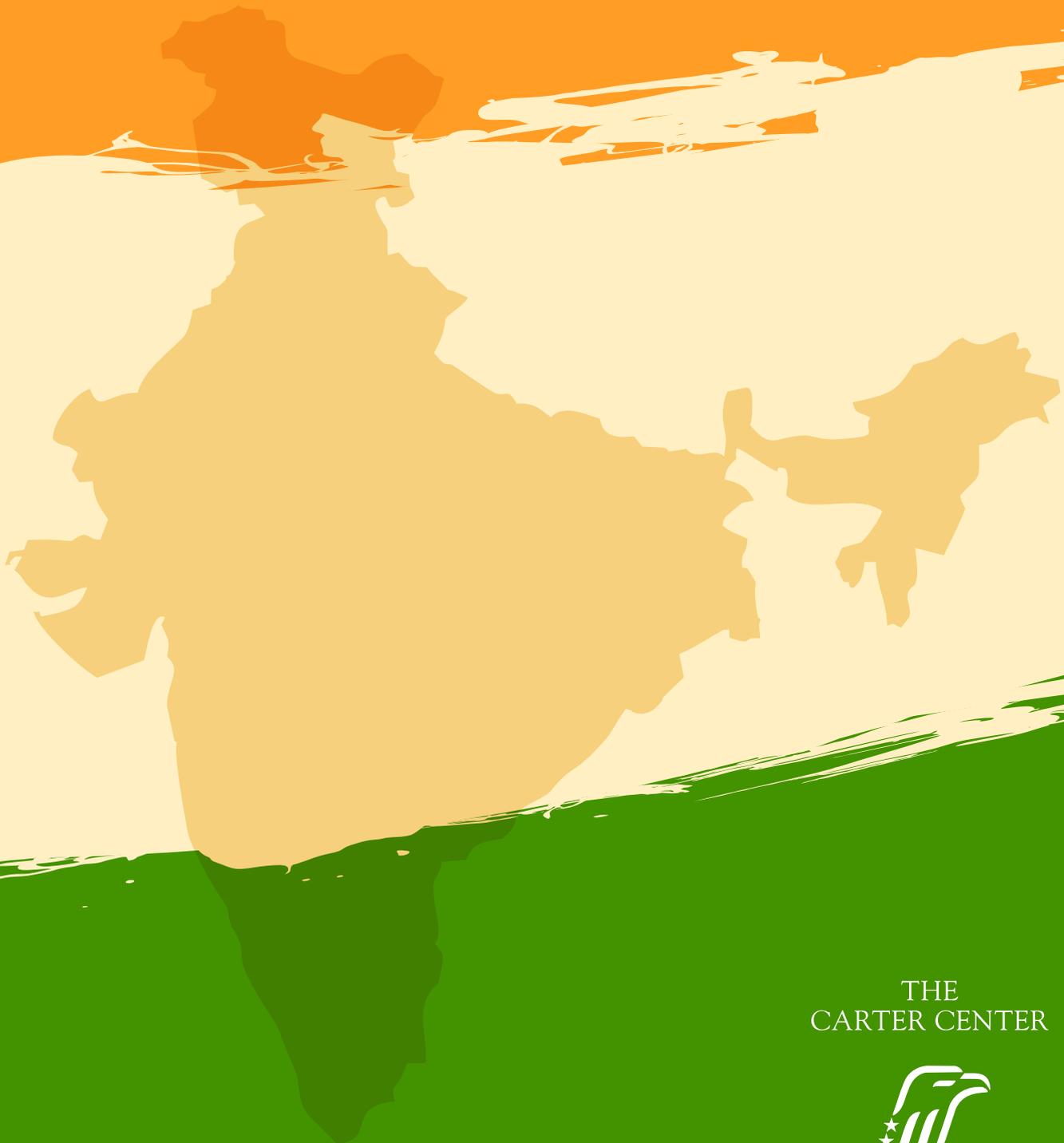


INDIA POLICY
COMMENTARY

Groundwork for Democratic Partnership: President Carter and U.S.-India Ties

By Paige Alexander
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On January 3, 1978, President Jimmy Carter and First Lady Rosalynn Carter traveled to the Indian village of Daulatpur Nasirabad, an hour southwest of New Delhi. He was the third American president to visit India and the only one with a personal connection to the country – his mother, Lillian, had worked there as a health volunteer with the Peace Corps during the late 1960s. The visit was so successful that shortly after, village residents renamed the area “Carterpuri” and remained in contact with the White House for the rest of President Carter’s tenure. The trip made a lasting impression: Festivities abounded in the village when President Carter won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, and January 3 remains a holiday in Carterpuri.

This is just one example of President Carter’s great strides in strengthening the U.S.-India relationship during his time in office, laying the groundwork for an enduring partnership that has greatly benefited both countries. His central innovation in the bilateral relationship, as well as in his foreign policy writ large, was to put democracy and human rights at the forefront of how the United States engaged with the world. President Carter understood that democracy and human rights are inextricably linked to economic prosperity and global peace.

“For the remainder of this century and into the next,” he said in [his 1978 address to the Indian Parliament](#), “the democratic countries of the world will increasingly turn to each other for answers to our most pressing, common challenge: how our political and spiritual values can provide the basis for dealing with the social and economic strains to which they will unquestionably be subjected.”

President Carter understood that shared democratic principles formed a strong foundation for a long, fruitful relationship between the United States and India. It is, therefore, no surprise that the two nations grew steadily closer in the decades after he left office.

In fact, since the Carter administration, the U.S. and India have worked closely on energy, humanitarian aid, technology, space cooperation, maritime security, disaster relief, counterterrorism, and more. In the mid-2000s, the United States and India struck a landmark agreement to work toward full civil nuclear cooperation, and bilateral trade has since skyrocketed. In 2010, the first U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue took place in Washington D.C., launching what President Barack Obama called “[an unprecedented partnership](#).”

The arc of U.S.-India ties from the Carter administration to the Biden administration is one of increasing cooperation in both depth and breadth. There are many areas of mutual interest — particularly trade and defense — where successful collaboration has fostered interdependency between the two countries.

Where do the democratic values that President Carter so eloquently described stand in the U.S.-India partnership? What is the state of Indian democracy today, how might it impact the U.S.-India partnership, and what might President Carter’s legacy tell us about a way forward?

These are questions American policymakers would do well to ask themselves. After all, in recent years, India has seen a significant decline in global indices that measure the strength of democratic norms and practices, and certain domestic developments have begun to pose risks for the U.S.-India partnership. Observers have expressed concerns about freedom of the press, freedom of association, judicial independence, and protection of vulnerable minorities – including religious minorities like Muslims and Christians – as noted in the U.S. State Department’s Reports on International Religious Freedom. For example, in 2022, PEN

America ranked India among the 10 countries where freedom of expression is most under threat, trailing closely behind China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Meanwhile, the previous year, Freedom House ranked India as only “partly free” due to a sharp decline in protections for political rights and civil liberties.

The economic downturn has exacerbated these fault lines, posing an obstacle to foreign investment in India, while the recent crisis in Ukraine has brought attention to India’s relationship with Russia. Despite India’s long-standing reputation as the world’s largest electoral democracy, these political developments have raised important questions about the health of substantive, participatory democracy for the Indian people.

President Carter’s legacy is instructive for American policymakers considering how to ensure that a shared commitment to democracy and human rights remains central to the U.S.-India partnership. As he said, the United States and India share not only the goals of promoting peace and development but also “the conviction that the means we employ to reach these goals must be as much in keeping with the principles of freedom, human dignity, and social justice, as are the goals themselves.”

Ultimately, the hard-won gains of the U.S.-India partnership are at risk when democracy in either country faces challenges. Therefore, it is incumbent upon both partners — the world’s oldest and the world’s largest democracies — to look inward and keep each other accountable for ensuring shared values remain at the forefront of their partnership.

This task is more crucial today than ever; after all, we are at the type of moment President Carter alluded to in his 1978 address to the Indian Parliament, one where our “political and spiritual values” are being subject to “social and economic strains.” By strengthening their democracies, the U.S. and India can ensure many more years of increasingly robust and fruitful cooperation and see the seed of friendship that was planted in Carterpuri continue to blossom.

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Paige Alexander joined The Carter Center as chief executive officer in June 2020. Alexander has had a distinguished global development career, with over two decades of experience spanning the government and nonprofit sectors. She has held senior leadership positions at two regional bureaus of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), covering missions and development programs in 25 countries.

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