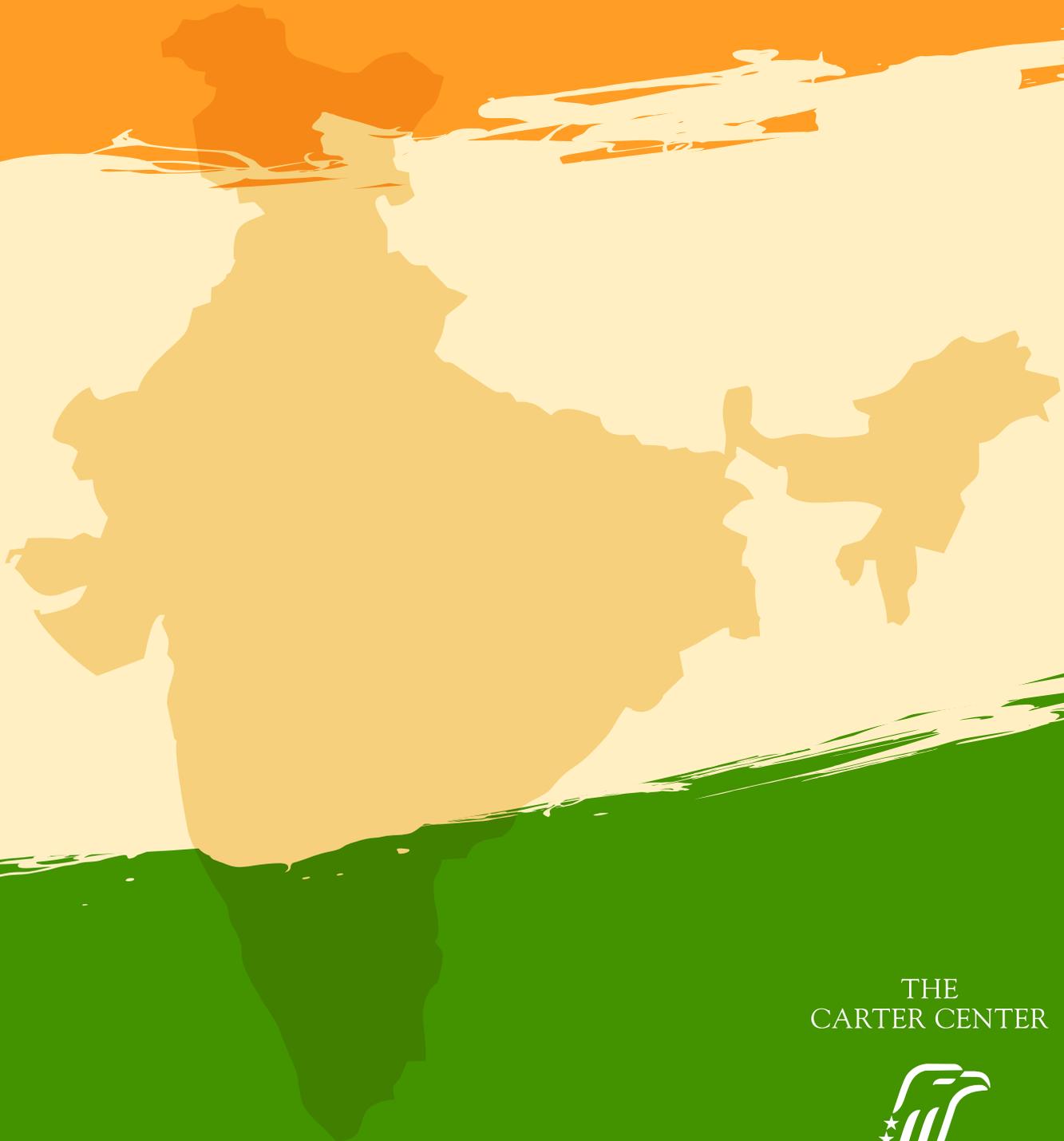


INDIA POLICY
COMMENTARY

What Kind of Neighbor is India Becoming?

By Yelena Biberman
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How will South Asia be affected if India's democracy continues to backslide? How will India relate to its neighbors? These questions carry implications not just for Delhi's prestige, but also for the 2 billion people living in the region, [global nuclear and environmental security](#), and the [U.S.'s Indo-Pacific strategy](#).

Some would say that what matters for international relations in South Asia is not the quality of India's democracy but the regional security environment, including factors such as the [deepening Sino-Pakistani ties](#). Others point to India's [economic interests](#) and [the power of reputation](#). In his [new book](#), Rohan Mukherjee makes the case for the role of international institutions.

All of these arguments assume that India will act in its national interest regardless of who governs it or how it is governed. But what if the interests of those in charge conflict with the broader national interest? Might an authoritarian leader prioritize political survival and regime consolidation over the long-term interests of the state? Russia's Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Recep Erdoğan suggest the answer is yes. The outright invasion of Ukraine and the saber-rattling over the Greek islands close to the Turkish mainland are risky and potentially very costly adventures for the Russian and Turkish states, respectively. Yet, the authoritarian leaders of these states have used military invasion (Russia) and military threats (Turkey) despite the serious risks and costs.

In the case of India, democratic backsliding is likely to result in the country's behaving more aggressively and unpredictably toward its neighbors. Its increasingly authoritarian leaders may evoke the semblance of realpolitik to justify their actions, but in fact their calculations derive from their personal and political ambitions, in particular the desire to survive at any cost. Some have pointed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's [demonetization scheme](#), ostensibly meant to curtail the shadow economy, and the [abrogation of Kashmir's special status](#) as evidence of his prioritization of electoral gains over what is economically or strategically sound.

In the face of democratic backsliding, with the current government of India prioritizing regime consolidation above all else, what would this mean for the India-Pakistan relationship? The existing sources of tension between the two countries would likely intensify. These include [Kashmir](#) and the historical [water](#) and [border](#) disputes, which Delhi could resurrect. It also includes the so-called "String of Pearls" strategy, which some in [India](#) and the [United States](#) believe involves China using India's neighbors to encircle India and threaten its power projection. Pakistan is said to play a key role in this strategy, as are Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's relationship with China is [complicated](#), to say the least. But the existing maritime territorial disputes with India could be a cause of serious conflict, as the [bitter 2021 dispute](#) over fishing rights shows.

India has generally enjoyed goodwill in Bangladesh after helping the country achieve independence from Pakistan in 1971. However, with increasing ultranationalism and communal tensions in India and Bangladesh's movement toward China, there is growing mistrust between the two countries. Indeed, there are already multiple potential sources of conflict, among them the Teesta River water-sharing problem. Additionally, a breakdown in an existing water agreement, such as the Ganges Water Treaty, would have catastrophic consequences for the

millions of Bangladeshis whose livelihood depends on agriculture and fishing. The issues of border security and immigration could also further flare up. India may, for example, strengthen its [Citizenship Act](#) and tighten the border between India and Bangladesh. This would hamper the movement of people and hinder trade between the two countries.

Two mechanisms may explain the link between democratic backsliding and aggressive, unpredictable foreign policy. The first is the reduced public accountability that authoritarian leaders enjoy. Decisions resulting from their individual idiosyncrasies or psychological states are less likely to be questioned and “auto-corrected” according to what is in the national interest. Second, when authoritarians feel that their political survival is threatened by a poorly performing economy or resurgent opposition, they tend to look for scapegoats, be they internal or external, to deflect attention from their policy failures.

The June 2022 controversy around the offensive remarks about the Prophet Muhammad by two senior leaders from India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) shows both mechanisms at play. The BJP leaders were punished, with one suspended from the party and the other expelled, but India suffered serious diplomatic damage from the incident. Michael Kugelman [observed](#) this in Foreign Policy’s South Asia Brief: “Twenty governments and multilateral organizations ... issued formal condemnations. ... In the Persian Gulf region, where India has deep economic ties, governments have denounced the remarks and summoned Indian ambassadors.” But, as India’s democracy is far from a lost cause, Kugelman concludes on an optimistic note: “Perhaps India has received a wake-up call: Its toxic domestic politics can deliver big blows to its diplomatic and security interests.”

The wake-up call, however, is also for the United States. India’s “toxic domestic politics” threaten U.S. national interests by driving India’s neighbors closer to China while also making significantly more likely an India-Pakistan [nuclear confrontation and, consequently, a global environmental and humanitarian catastrophe](#). In the long run, Delhi could become what Washington fears of Beijing: a revisionist, authoritarian power.

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Yelena Biberman is associate professor of political science at Skidmore College, nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council’s South Asia Center, and associate at Harvard University’s Davis Center. Her book *Gambling with Violence: State Outsourcing of War in Pakistan and India* was published by Oxford University Press in 2019.

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

www.cartercenter.org