

The Opportunities and Challenges of Courting India

Sanjay Ruparelia

ruparelia@torontomu.ca

Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, ON, Canada

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Abstract

This chapter examines the pivotal role that India plays in Canada's new Indo-Pacific strategy. New Delhi and Ottawa espouse a shared commitment to democracy, pluralism and multilateralism. Moreover, there exist many opportunities to deepen economic ties, promote the transition to a net-zero economy and counter security threats posed by China, highlighting convergent interests. Yet courting India poses dilemmas too. On the one hand, the erosion of the world's largest democracy, amid other instances of backsliding around the world, belies recent efforts to frame international cooperation through the prism of democracies versus autocracies. On the other hand, India's long-standing commitment to maintaining strategic autonomy and creating a multipolar order that no longer privileges western powers challenges the Atlanticist worldview that has dominated Canada's foreign policy and national self-image.

Keywords

Indo-Pacific Strategy

Autonomy

Pluralism

Multilateralism

Multipolar International Cooperation

Introduction

In 2022, the Trudeau government unveiled its long-awaited Indo-Pacific strategy for Canada. It had five broad objectives: to promote peace, resilience and security; to expand trade, investment and diverse supply chains; to forge people-to-people connections between Canada and the region; to build a sustainable future; and to strengthen whole-of-society partnerships. The launch of the new strategy, given the shifting center of gravity in the global political economy to the Pacific, was overdue. Yet the key political motivation driving its timing was clear: to contain the rise of China, described as "an increasingly disruptive global power", whose values and interests "increasingly depart from ours" (Global Affairs Canada [2022](#): 7).

Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy perceives India to be a "critical partner" in the region given its strategic, economic and demographic weight. Several presumptions inform this view: "a shared tradition of democracy and pluralism, a common commitment to a rules-based international system and multilateralism, mutual interest in expanding our commercial relationship and extensive and growing people-to-people connections" (Global Affairs Canada [2022](#): 9).

India and Canada share important commonalities as well as convergent interests along each of these dimensions. Since establishing a federal democratic republic in 1950, India has represented an alternative model of political modernity in Asia vis-a-vis the communist party-state of the People's Republic of China, which is approaching its 75th anniversary. Indeed, the constitution of the world's largest democracy codifies a deeper separation of powers and series of checks and balances than found in Canada's political regime. Second, successive governments in New Delhi have upheld key aspects of the post-1945 international order, most importantly the United Nations and principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The growing willingness of China to press its claims along the contested Line of Actual Control (LaC) over the last few years, and assert its dominance in Asia more widely, has tested Sino-Indian relations. Since the millennium, the United States has buttressed ties with India along multiple dimensions, from trade and investment to security and defense, actively supporting India's rise to balance China's rising power. Third, the size and trajectory of India's economy, projected to be the third largest in the world by 2030, offers Canada opportunities to expand trade and investment in manufacturing and services in the digital era, to construct new supply chains with greater resilience, and to advance cutting-edge technologies and policy innovations to improve global public health and achieve a net-zero global economy. Finally, Indo-Canadian relations have improved considerably over the last two decades, driven by efforts to expand commercial opportunities, while the size and influence of various diaspora communities grows significantly in many realms.

Yet courting India poses genuine challenges. First, like many democracies around the world, India has witnessed significant backsliding since the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) captured power in 2014. The routine emphasis on democracy and pluralism that Canada routinely touts to distinguish its closest allies and to criticize traditional autocratic regimes invites charges of selective morality and political hypocrisy. Second, a variety of factors limit opportunities for ramping up trade and investment between India and Canada, from the structure and interests of their respective political economies and self-perceived vulnerabilities and red lines to asymmetric bargaining positions. Third, despite its growing defense and security ties with the United States and other western allies, India continues to prioritize strategic autonomy in international affairs. It relies on arms from Russia and energy from the Persian Gulf, while seeking to bolster trade with Britain, Australia and the EU, as well as Brazil, South Africa and China. India seeks to craft a multipolar post-Western international order, not a return to superpower bipolarity in a new Cold War, and thus will likely continue to hedge and balance its interests in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. Finally, notwithstanding deepening ties between India and Canada, conflicting interests and divergent views on important matters persist. Indeed, as India grows more powerful and confident, they are likely to grow in multiple realms, from differences over how to advance trade liberalization and mitigate climate change, to how to address diaspora politics and reform power asymmetries in key multilateral institutions.

As a result, Canada's aim to pursue its purported democratic values and strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific in a coherent manner will prove to be a tough balancing act.

Democracy Under Duress¹

Post-independent India's soft power rests significantly on its status, against unprecedented odds, as the world's largest democracy. Electoral competition remains vibrant at multiple levels. The 2019 general election, which returned the BJP to power with a larger parliamentary majority than it won in 2014, saw the highest turnout since independence. Over 67 percent of the electorate, comprising almost 880 million citizens, cast their ballots. Women and men comprised roughly equal shares among registered voters. Urban residents, who unlike their western counterparts traditionally vote less, turned out in greater numbers than ever before. Voting among Adivasi communities in Scheduled Tribe constituencies reached almost 75 percent (Verniers 2019).

Despite the national political dominance of the BJP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, opposition parties have ousted the ruling party and its allies in various state-level elections in India's sprawling federal parliamentary democracy. The BJP lost several regional bastions between 2016 and 2019 as well as important contests in 2021. Today, it governs sixteen of the 30 states and union territories that have legislative assemblies.² The party commands a seat majority in ten of these states, compelling it to share power through multi-party coalitions in the other six, which together represent half of the population of India (Poddar 2023).³

In addition, opposition parties have stymied attempts by the ruling party to push controversial legislation in New Delhi at various points, ranging from land acquisition and agricultural marketing to labor laws (Ninan [2022](#)). The former can veto the latter given its minority status in the upper house of parliament. And social protests and mass demonstrations can force the Modi government to reconsider contentious policies. The passage of three bills in the fall of 2021 to deregulate the agricultural sector, without consulting state governments and trade unions, inspired hundreds of thousands of farmers to encircle the main road arteries of the national capital for a year. The most powerful social movement India has witnessed since the 1980s forced the government to retreat (Ruparelia [2021a](#)).

Nevertheless, India has experienced significant democratic backsliding in recent years, thanks to the autocratic majoritarian character of the new ruling dispensation. New legislation, executive action and political discourse have eroded civil liberties, institutional autonomy and minority rights, challenging the secular foundations of its democratic constitution and the complex pluralism of its everyday social fabric.

Since capturing power in 2014, Prime Minister Modi has concentrated executive power to an extent last seen in the 1970s under his Congress predecessor, Indira Gandhi. Few members of the Council of Ministers exercise genuine independence. Modi rarely grants opposition members the opportunity to scrutinize him in parliament. A classic populist, the prime minister generally avoids press conferences, directly communicating with his tens of millions of followers through social media and digital apps, to create a powerful cult of personality and presidential style of rule.

In addition, opposition parties confront an increasingly skewed electoral field. Campaign finance laws in India, ill-designed and poorly enforced, have allowed money to disproportionately shape politics for many years. But the introduction of so-called electoral bonds in 2017, which concealed the identity of donors to the public but not to the government, made campaign finance even more opaque. The BJP accrues a staggering share of such donations. After returning to power in 2020, its declared assets of \$655 million exceeded the cumulative total of the next 51 parties, reflecting an increase of roughly 440 percent since 2015 (*The Economist* [2022a](#)). More broadly, supporters of and politicians from the BJP frequently question the legitimacy of opposition parties, depicting partisan rivals as anti-national forces that undermine sound governance and national unity.

Perhaps the most disturbing change over the last decade is the increasing militancy of Hindu nationalist forces. The political dominance of the BJP encourages party hardliners and associated social organizations to pursue their long-standing desire to transform India into a Hindu nation. State governments run by the party have introduced, or amended, cow protection laws with harsher penalties. Legislation against religious conversion and interfaith marriages stipulate onerous conditions that undermine individual liberty and the right to equality (Mehta [2022](#)). Public displays of Hindu religious identity are increasing and expected (Jayal [2019](#)). Indeed, militant activists and vigilante groups have sought to enforce these laws through harassment, intimidation and violence, leading to a rising number of deadly incidents and mob lynchings that principally target Muslims (Varshney [2019](#)). The failure of the police to intervene in time, or their complicity, allows the perpetrators to act with growing impunity in many cases.

The campaign for the 2019 general election displayed an unprecedented level of religious polarization (Varshney [2019](#)). The return to power of the BJP rallied its hardliners to advance a militant agenda. The government annulled Article 370 of the constitution, which conferred special rights to the contested Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir, transforming its constituent regions into union territories directly ruled by the Centre. The official rationale for the move was to bolster domestic security and economic development. But foreign journalists and diplomats were barred from entering the territory. The presence of 500,000 troops, house arrest of opposition party leaders and sweeping communications lock down in the region, which lasted six months, underscored its autocratic character (Schultz and Yasir [2020](#)). Internet connection remains extremely poor and many journalists cannot travel abroad (Dhawan [2022](#)). In addition, the Modi government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), allowing illegal migrants fleeing religious persecution in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh to gain citizenship more quickly, but exempted Muslims. Its intent was clear: to legalize the idea that India was a natural homeland for Hindus. The act violated the secular foundation of Indian citizenship.

Members of India's vibrant civil society have condemned these events and broader developments. Historically, freedom of speech, assembly and association have faced restrictions. But the space for criticism and dissent in the public sphere is narrower today. The professional risks—sometimes personal—are greater too. Traditional newspapers, legacy media and intrepid journalists that criticize the new ruling establishment can suffer bureaucratic harassment, political interference and unemployment. Self-censorship and selective reporting are rising; corporate advertising is declining. Similarly, academic freedom and freedom of speech in university campuses and artistic centers face growing constraints (Jayal [2019](#)). In extreme cases, students, writers and activists criticizing official government policy and human rights violations have been charged with attempting to “incite [religious] hatred” and “hurt religious feelings”. A tweet by the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, supporting the farmers' protest, compelled the ruling party to warn of a “conspiracy to wage economic, social, cultural and regional war against India”, charge an associated Indian activist with sedition, and force Twitter and Facebook to suspend hundreds of accounts in the name of national security (Ellis-Petersen [2021](#)). It later introduced new Internet rules, enabling the state to remove material, hold social media companies' executives liable for violations and create systems to identify the author of “offensive” posts (PRS Legislative Research [2021](#)). Finally, NGOs and independent research institutes that cross the party can find themselves accused of tax violations and lose their licenses to receive funding from abroad, jeopardizing the activities and sometimes even the viability of organizations, ranging from national affiliates of Oxfam, Amnesty and Greenpeace to internationally renowned think tanks such as the Centre for Policy Research. Media organizations are subject to similar measures too. The ruling party invoked emergency laws to block YouTube and Twitter sharing a BBC documentary that revisited the failure of the prime minister to prevent an anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat under his watch in 2002, calling it “hostile propaganda and anti-India garbage”, with a “colonial mind-set” (*New York Times* [2023](#)). Tax agents subsequently raided two BBC offices. India currently ranks 150 out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index (Reed [2022](#)).

The Supreme Court of India, constitutionally one of the most powerful in the world, checked executive overreach at the start. In 2015, the Court struck down a new judicial appointments commission designed to favor the executive. A landmark ruling in 2017 declared privacy to be a fundamental constitutional right. But the Modi government countered, reportedly transferring justices perceived to be hostile to the BJP, blocking the elevation of others and allegedly even conspiring to fix the composition of benches in sensitive judicial cases. And the apex judiciary abdicated its constitutional responsibilities on several momentous issues. In Kashmir, the Court delayed hearing cases invoking habeas corpus, denied bail to opposition leaders and failed to investigate mass detentions in the region. In Uttar Pradesh, it noted that Hindu nationalists' destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 violated the rule of law, but still ruled that the Hindu plaintiffs could build a temple on the contested site.

The repression of civil liberties and institutional autonomy in India, alongside the growing crackdown on minority rights, significantly lowered its ranking in leading global surveys of democracy. In 2021, Freedom House and the Varieties of Democracy research institute classified the world's largest democracy as "partly free" (Freedom House [2021](#)) and an "electoral autocracy" (V-Dem [2022](#): 15), respectively. The BJP external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, dismissed both reports: "It is hypocrisy. Because you have a set of self-appointed custodians of the world who find it very difficult to stomach that somebody in India is not looking for their approval, is not willing to play the game they want to play. So they invent their rules, their parameters, pass their judgments and make it look as if it is some kind of global exercise" (Roy [2021](#)). Similarly, when his counterpart Anthony Blinken remarked that the US was "monitoring some recent concerning developments in India, including a rise in human rights abuses by some government, police and prison officials", Jaishankar retorted: "I would tell you that we also take our views on other people's human rights situation, including that of the United States" (Mashal [2022](#)).

Such exchanges underscore a complex predicament. On the one hand, the conspicuous silence of many western leaders at recent G7 summits regarding developments in India reflects prudence, given their focus on China. But it mocks their professed commitments to "freedom of expression", the "independence of civil society", and other democratic values, institutions and practices (Mashal [2022](#)). On the other hand, western democracies are ill-placed to pass quick moral judgments. Persistent colonial legacies, and their expedient support during the Cold War and since its end for autocratic regimes when it serves perceived interests, inform popular consciousness in many Southern polities. Moreover, many western democracies themselves suffer from serious backsliding, from persistent Republican attempts to doubt the credibility of the 2020 US presidential election and disenfranchise Black voters, to the surge of anti-immigrant right-wing nationalist parties with fascist roots in Germany, France, Italy, Denmark and Sweden. They must be willing to face a critical external gaze to lessen the understandable cynicism of many postcolonial societies.

Trajectories and Challenges of Development

Since 1980, India has achieved rapid economic growth, lessened absolute poverty and improved outcomes in public health and basic education. By 2014, India was the tenth largest economy in the world. Current projections estimate that it will be the third largest by 2030, following China and the US (Pasricha [2022](#)).

Several factors drive these projections. First, India now has the largest population in the world, with a median age of 28 (Rizwan [2022](#)). Compared to China, which risks becoming old before getting rich due to the legacy of its one-child policy, India enjoys a demographic dividend of young workers.

Second, the country possesses a dynamic entrepreneurial culture and leading business conglomerates. Its world-renowned information technology and outsourcing industry, led by Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services, doubled in size over the past decade to US\$230bn in annual revenues, making India the world's fifth-biggest exporter of services. A global shortage of software engineers is likely to fuel its growth (*The Economist* [2022b](#)). Big national firms in automobiles, such as Bajaj, and pharmaceutical companies, most notably Cipla and Syngene, are joining the ranks of significant global players in other sectors (Flood [2022](#)). The number of unicorns in India (start-ups worth greater than US\$1bn), which range across education, finance, digital payments, tourism, entertainment and cloud computing, puts it third in the world (*The Economist* [2022b](#)). The returns of its stock market, the fourth largest, have doubled the global average since 1990. Indeed, over the last decade, 150 stocks rose more than 500 percent, representing almost 40 percent of India's \$1bn+ stocks, the highest concentration among emerging markets. Two-thirds of its billionaires, whose number increased from 55 to 140, made their fortunes in technology and manufacturing (Sharma [2022](#)).

Third, a range of policies and initiatives have integrated the national economy. The passage of the goods and services tax in 2017 reduced inter-state trade barriers. The rapid expansion of infrastructural capacities has furthered the prospects for growth and development. Since 2014, the national highway network and number of domestic air passengers has doubled, while mobile-phone base stations have tripled, supporting almost 800 million users today (*The Economist* [2022b](#)). Government provision has greatly expanded the number of households with access to electricity, sanitation and bank accounts (Subramanian and Felman [2022](#)).

Finally, the country enjoys massive potential for greater structural transformation. The share of formal sector employment and manufacturing in the economy remains extremely low compared to East and South-East Asia. India failed to embrace labor intensive industrialization and the opportunities created by the expansion of global value chains, which transformed the Pacific rim (Batra [2022](#)). The BJP came to power vowing to modernize the economy. The Make in India programme set a target of creating 100 million new jobs in manufacturing and increasing the share of the latter to GDP to 25 percent by 2022. In 2020, the Modi government launched a new industrial policy, Aatmanirbhar Bharat, allocating \$26bn in subsidies over the next five years to incentivize domestic and foreign firms to reach specified production targets in 13 sectors (Subramanian and Felman [2022](#)). The disruption to global supply chains during the pandemic, and efforts by the US and other western countries to de-couple from China, has created new economic opportunities. Reports that Apple may produce half of its iPhones in India by 2027—compared to projections of 25 percent by 2025 just two years ago (*Times of India* [2023](#))—buoy expectations of similar trends in electronics, chemicals, textiles, pharmaceuticals and industrial machinery (Jain et al. [2022](#)).

Yet these bullish market sentiments must contend with policy mistakes and disconcerting trends over the last decade that continue to unfold. The decision to demonetize the economy in 2016, when New Delhi removed 86 percent of all currency from circulation in an alleged bid to flush out corrupt black money, followed by severe lockdowns during the pandemic, caused a deep economic shock to small- and medium-sized firms that employ the bulk of workers and rely on cash payments in vast informal markets. As a result, many critical measures of the economy have regressed, from economic growth, investment and exports to agriculture, employment and social sector spending (Inamdar and Alluri [2021](#)). On the one hand, manufacturing employment nearly halved from 51 million in 2016–2017 to 27 million in 2020–2021. Millions of young workers exited the labor force, signaling mounting distress (Bhardwaj [2022](#)). The Modi government delayed or suppressed economic surveys of politically sensitive indicators, which showed rising poverty, declining consumption and falling employment. On the other hand, corporate profits are becoming more concentrated. Today, the top 20 listed firms capture two-thirds of the total (Ninan [2022](#)).

In addition, after decades of gradual external liberalization, New Delhi has reversed tack. Since 2014, tariffs have increased 3200 times, affecting roughly 70 percent of total exports, to an average rate to 18 percent (Subramanian and Felman [2022](#)). Moreover, after signing almost a dozen preferential trade agreements between 2004 and 2014, India refused to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2019. Reportedly, the negotiations failed to offer enough new opportunities for its globally competitive IT firms to offset domestic industrialists' fears of foreign competition (*The Economist* [2019](#)) and persistent anxieties about food security. The stance was rational in the short run—supporting liberalization where it enjoyed comparative global advantages, protecting sectors where it had strategic vulnerabilities (Hopewell [2018](#))—and reflected the unusual divergence of its rich–poor economy. But these decisions make it more expensive for firms to import high-quality inputs required to realize India's manufacturing ambitions, and to export to Asia's most comprehensive trade zone, in the long run (Subramanian and Felman [2022](#)). The dilemma of high corporate profits amid a narrow domestic market, and premature deindustrialization (Rodrik [2015](#)) amid a rapidly growing workforce, risks becoming acute.

The Desire to Maintain Strategic Autonomy

The dramatic rise of China raises significant questions for every country. The willingness of Beijing to increase domestic repression, and to pursue its perceived core interests abroad more forcefully, challenges several norms, rules and practices of the contemporary international order. Hence the growing alarm and shifting attitudes, elite and popular, in many Western democracies.

New Delhi shares many of these concerns. Modi and Xi met almost 20 times between 2014 and 2019, signaling the importance of the bilateral relationship. Deadly clashes erupted in the Galwan valley in 2020 when Chinese troops occupied Indian territory, however, following several years of escalation along the LaC. The Modi government retaliated by imposing a stiffer review process on Chinese investments, restrictions on bids for government procurement and 5G technology, and bans on several apps. Why Beijing provoked these clashes generates debate: from demonstrating its greater power to signaling its displeasure at the truncation of Kashmir and growing Indo-US ties (Menon [2022](#)). The stand-off, and new status quo, prevails. Sino-Indian relations are at their lowest point since the 1962 war.

Strategic, economic and defense ties between India and the United States, whose relations were fraught during the Cold War, deepened remarkably over the last two decades. The Indo-US civil-nuclear deal, signed by Manmohan Singh and George W. Bush, recognized India's legitimacy as a nuclear power. Barack Obama visited India twice during his tenure, announcing a "pivot to Asia". The Trump administration, which initiated the 2 + 2 Dialogue, announced major US investments in renewables and defense, and agreed a significant accord enabling Washington to share high-level intelligence with New Delhi (Kugelman [2022](#)). It also embraced the concept, formulated by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, of a "free and open Indo-Pacific", identifying India as "the most consequential partner [in the region] ... in this century" (Outlook Web Desk [2020b](#)).

Joe Biden criticized India during his presidential campaign for abrogating Kashmir's constitutional powers (Outlook Web Desk [2020a](#)). Yet he had played a key role in securing the civil nuclear deal. Since assuming office, the Biden administration has made the Indo-Pacific region a focal point of its national strategic framework, appointing a coordinator in the National Security Council (Press Trust of India [2023](#)). The first leaders' summit, in March 2021, elevated the status and scope of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) to encompass cybersecurity and critical and emerging technologies as well as climate change and global public health. The alliance also designated the Indian ocean, where China's military footprint is growing, as part of its ambit (Kugelman [2022](#)). And the US unveiled the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). Encompassing twelve countries in the region, and designed in response to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and RCEP, the IPEF seeks to establish standards and create incentives to boost digital trade and clean energy, improve supply chain resilience and combat tax evasion (Banyan [2022](#)). For the US, "India is a like-minded partner and leader in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, active in and connected to Southeast Asia, a driving force of the Quad and other regional fora, and an engine for regional growth and development" (Mohan [2022a](#)). The most recent steps include the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies, to boost cooperation on quantum computing, artificial intelligence, 5G wireless networks and semiconductors, and a mechanism to facilitate joint weapons production. India is "the key" to US ambitions in the Indo-Pacific (Sevastopulo and Reed [2023](#)).

However, despite the rise of voices in New Delhi that advocate deeper Indo-US ties against the old Nehruvian reflex toward non-alignment (Bajpai [2011](#)), successive national governments continue to prioritize strategic autonomy. The desire for recognition, a seat at the high table where rules are made and the capacity to mediate disputes, conflicts and differences as a “rising bridge power”, rather than accommodation or alliance with the west, are key elements of this ambition (Sinha [2016](#): 228). According to former national security advisor Shivshankar Menon, India should “work simultaneously with multifarious partners, such as Russia and the US and Iran and Japan ... [through] issue-based coalitions of the willing ... a variable geometry” (Menon [2022](#)).

Neoliberals counter that India must strengthen its tilt to the US given congruent interests in many realms, growing American support for India’s great power ambitions and mounting tensions with China. Notably, Modi was the first Indian prime minister since 1979 to skip the annual summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), signaling a shift. Since 2017, however, India has voted alongside the US in the UN General Assembly 28 percent of the time, only slightly more than China and slightly less than Russia. The tally for traditional US allies, in contrast, was more than 50 percent (*The Economist* [2022a](#)). India remains averse to the idea of the “global west” (see Rachman [2022](#)), bringing Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea into the orbit of NATO. To describe the Quad as an “Asian NATO”, contends the BJP’s external affairs minister, is “completely misleading” (Press Trust of India [2022b](#)). Rather, its establishment reflects a new multipolar era where multilateralism is working poorly and reforming too slowly (Australian National University [2021](#)). Tellingly, he stated: “We have to put the Cold War behind us, only those who are stuck in the Cold War can’t understand the Quad” (Bagchi [2021](#)). The target of his riposte was China, which decried the US Indo-Pacific strategy in such terms. Yet it could equally apply to NATO. New Delhi prefers overlapping mini-lateral coalitions (Mohan [2021](#)).

Similarly, India is unlikely to join growing western efforts to construe international conflicts through the prism of democracy versus autocracy. India played a key role in crafting the UN Declaration of Human Rights and exposing western efforts to protect South African apartheid from scrutiny (Mehta [2011](#): 100). Since independence, however, successive governments prioritized the principles of national sovereignty and domestic non-intervention championed by the NAM and G77, and generally eschewed promoting democracy abroad. India was a founding member of the Community of Democracies, spearheaded by the Clinton administration in 2000, and supported the creation of the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF) in 2006, rivaling the financial contributions made by the subsequent Bush administration. Yet New Delhi declined Washington’s invitation to lead the UN Democracy Caucus (Mohan [2007](#): 103–107). The disastrous US intervention in Iraq in the name of freedom reinforced long-standing skepticism among Indian policymakers of the motives and capacity of western powers instigating regime change. Rather, they favored “democracy assistance”: targeted support under the auspices of the UNDEF, at the request of host governments, offering technical knowledge, training sessions and financial support to local organizations. The Modi government has significantly reduced support for the UNDEF, however (Hall [2017](#): 87–92).

Few issues illustrate the complex balancing act India seeks to maintain, its “cautious prudence” (Mehta [2011](#): 108), better than its contemporary relations vis-a-vis Russia and China and the US.

India refused to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, abstained in successive UN votes and failed to join western sanctions at the start. Several factors drove its stance. India is the third biggest military spender in the world after the US and China. Its defense budget increased 50 percent over the last decade. Yet China’s military expenditure is still four times bigger, and its air and naval forces are far superior (Reed and Cornish [2022](#)). Moreover, India’s arms imports, which comprise 84 per cent of total procurement, make it the second largest importer in the world (*The Indian Express* [2022](#)). In recent years, India has increased military supplies from France, Israel and especially the US. But Russia supplies roughly 60 percent of its arms, its only aircraft carrier and nuclear-powered submarine, and most of its tanks and jets (Patel [2022](#)). The tense standoff between India and China along the LaC makes the former dependent on parts and maintenance and wary of driving Russia closer to the latter. Viewing a possible mediating role, New Delhi also believed its abstentions at the UN kept diplomacy open. And many remember the EU advocating peaceful resolution when violent clashes erupted along the LaC in 2020.

As the war in Ukraine intensified, however, New Delhi emphasized “its respect for international law, territorial integrity and political sovereignty ... its disapproval of the use of force to resolve disputes and of unilateral changes of the status quo ... the shelling of nuclear facilities ... and distanced itself from China’s more supportive position vis-à-vis Russia” (Madan [2022](#)). At a joint press conference with President Vladimir Putin at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in September 2022, Prime Minister Modi declared: “I know that today’s era is not the time of war” (Bilefsky and Mashal [2022](#)). Many western commentators interpreted his remarks favorably. Yet India’s imports of discounted Russian crude have soared since the war began, rising from less than one percent before the invasion to 17 percent. New Delhi highlighted its precarious financial position and continued European purchases (Schmall and Reed [2022](#))—a justification top EU officials accept while maintaining that supporting Ukraine is a vital western interest (Laskar [2023](#)).

The meetings of the G20 finance and foreign ministers in Bengaluru in February 2023, under India’s presidency, failed to produce a joint communique. Russia and China refused to condemn the war and reject the use of nuclear weapons. Thus India released a “chair’s summary and outcome document”, backed by 17 of its 20 members, which “deplored [the war] in the strongest possible terms” for its “immense human suffering and exacerbating existing fragilities in the global economy”, demanded “complete and unconditional” withdrawal from Ukraine territory, and declared “the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible” (Wheatley [2023](#)). But its diplomatic representatives refused to say whether India, which abstained from UNGA vote condemning the war preceding the G20 meetings, was among the 17 members.

The dilemmas facing Sino-Indian relations are clear too. The size of their respective national economies and average incomes were roughly equal at the end of the Cold War. India's GDP has grown tenfold to \$3.2 trillion, and its average per capita income fivefold to \$2200, over the last three decades. But China is now five times bigger and richer (Sharma [2022](#)). Moreover, the terms of trade weigh heavily against India with roughly \$70 billion in deficit, provoking complaints from its IT and pharmaceutical firms of restricted access to the Chinese market (Press Trust of India [2022a](#)). Hence calls for decoupling following the border clashes and invasion of Ukraine have grown in some quarters (see Mohan [2022b](#)).

Yet the value of trade between India and China, on the one hand, and India and the United States, on the other, is similar. China is a key foreign investor in several economic sectors in India, from IT and electronics to start-ups and autos, totaling roughly \$6 billion (Mondal [2020](#)). And leading diplomatic figures in New Delhi doubt the US can reverse the long-term decline of western power (Saran [2022](#)). Hence they counsel that India should rebalance the terms of trade vis-a-vis China and join regional pacts in Asia, rather than decouple, as many in the west now advocate (Menon [2022](#)). India's relations with the US and China, while a triangle, have their own bilateral dynamics (see Madan [2020](#)).

Arguably, the ideal strategic vision for many foreign policymakers in New Delhi remains a robust multipolar order in a post-Atlanticist world. Acknowledging the United States is a "natural ally", they nonetheless caution:

"Governments in the Indo-Pacific want to avoid geopolitical games: they have lives to improve, economies to develop, borders to secure, infrastructure to build and dreams to fulfil. ... America's competition with China must not chart a course for the future of the region in a way that causes irrevocable fault lines. Simplifications like "my enemy's enemy is my friend" or picking sides do not apply in South-East Asia in particular. ... Hedging and balancing are in their political DNA ... Countries in the region would prefer that America's hub-and-spoke approach to security (where countries are connected to it but not to each other) be replaced by a regional order built on "multiple stilts of different sizes and functions..." (Rao [2021](#))

Many leaders in the broader region, beyond Japan and South Korea, express similar views. They desire reliable US security guarantees vis-a-vis China. Yet their closer neighbor remains a vital source of trade and investment. Formally, Washington has encouraged partnerships among many allies in the Indo-Pacific, to create a "more networked regional architecture": "finding new opportunities to link our defense industrial bases, integrating our defense supply chains, and co-producing key technologies that will shore up our collective military advantages" (Mohan [2022a](#)). But the growing confrontational rhetoric in Washington, and its explicit desire to contain China's technological rise, alarms them (*The Economist* [2022c](#)).

Many similar tensions infuse the G20. Historically, the G7 has set its agenda, pushing the interests of advanced industrial economies. Hence the desire among emerging powers to reorient its priorities. It is hard to imagine any of them describing the G7 as the “steering committee of the free world”. For the first time since its establishment, the G20 presidency will pass successively between four Southern heavyweights: Indonesia (2022), India (2023), Brazil (2024) and South Africa (2025). New Delhi has expressed a “steadfast commitment to South-South Cooperation” during its term. Key concerns include how to restore economic growth and food and energy security, combat climate change and the global debt crisis equitably and reform the governance of key multilateral institutions (Subramanian [2022](#)). The global inequities exposed by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine exacerbate these problems. Emerging powers from the South are more likely to believe that a new cold war, forcing countries to align with China or the United States, would make them harder to address.

The Implications for Indo-Canadian Relations

Indo-Canadian relations have improved considerably over the last two decades, driven by efforts to expand commercial opportunities and the growing influence of diaspora communities in many realms. The prospects for strengthening a range of ties and connections are considerable.

First, both countries share mounting security concerns about China. Compared to the deadly clashes along the LaC, the decision by Beijing to engage in arbitrary hostage diplomacy and impose retaliatory trade bans following the arrest of Meng Wanzhou, and now mounting evidence of alleged Chinese interference in the last two federal elections, do not threaten the territorial integrity of Canada. But such measures violate key aspects of national sovereignty and international law, which New Delhi traditionally champions. Calls for Canada to join the Quad would bolster a shared commitment to maintain an open Indo-Pacific. Second, flows of trade and investment between Canada and India are relatively insignificant compared to other partners. Trade in goods and services in 2021 totaled less than Cdn\$15 billion (Global Affairs Canada [2022](#): 10). The scope for improvement, especially in manufacturing, energy transition and digital innovation, is thus large (Nachiappan [2023](#)). The recent signing of bilateral trade deals between New Delhi vis-a-vis Canberra and Dubai, and fast-track negotiations with London and Brussels, raises the prospects of a pact with Ottawa. Finally, members of the Indian diaspora play a significant role in many realms of Canada, from academia, journalism and civil society to business, public service and government. Indeed, Indian nationals now comprise roughly one-fifth of all new immigrants, the largest ratio among sending countries and double the percentage coming from China (Smith [2022](#)). Unlike previous waves, they are more likely to settle outside the major cities of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver (Bascaramurty [2022](#)), diversifying their presence across the country. Bolstering our capacity to process visas, and expanding academic, education and cultural exchanges, will deepen these important ties.

Yet conflicting interests and divergent views on significant matters persist.

First, recent events have deepened Canada's long-standing commitment to its traditional post-1945 alliances, from the Five Eyes and G7 to NATO. Comprehensive western sanctions against Russia, and the recent call by Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland for democracies to pursue "friend-shoring" with each other (McCarten [2022](#)), underscore this North Atlantic worldview. In contrast, India will continue to pursue its various diplomatic, economic and security interests by partnering with states and regimes that Canada increasingly seeks to isolate, from Russia and China to Iran. Similarly, despite its growing strategic partnership with the US and presence in ventures such as the Quad, New Delhi will maintain its membership in a diversity of forums that seek to promote the interests and views of the postcolonial South, such as the NAM and G77, its rising powers, from the BRICS and IBSA to the G20, and various regional groupings, including ASEAN, SAARC and the SCO. Canada's self-understanding as an Indo-Pacific nation, sensitive to the views, interests and concerns of potential Asian partners, has a long way to go (Woo [2022](#)).

Second, attempts by Ottawa and New Delhi to boost trade and investment face long-standing obstacles. Canada successfully attracts students and workers from India, many of whom possess or acquire highly valued skills that serve critical needs. But our administrative capacity to process applications for permanent residency in a timely manner is wanting. Thus many students and workers presently return to India once their work permits expire (Subramaniam [2022](#)). In addition, efforts to strike a trade deal remain protracted. Asymmetries in the size and structure of the two economies, and hence their bargaining positions, frustrate easy progress. Despite six rounds of bilateral negotiations, attempts to secure an Early Progress Trade Agreement are behind schedule, let alone a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement. Ottawa wants New Delhi to liberalize the agricultural sector and uphold labor protocols to a greater extent; New Delhi wants greater access for Indian firms in services. Disagreements on rules of origin, and dispute settlement mechanisms regarding foreign investment, persist (Moss [2023](#)). The dualistic character of the Indian economy—"developing" in agriculture and manufacturing but "advanced" in many services—will shape prospects of cooperation regarding the transition to a net-zero economy too. India has ramped up renewable energy supplies over the last decade, creating many opportunities for bilateral investment in clean tech, especially with France. Yet it remains a lower-middle income economy whose per capita carbon footprint remains a fraction of western industrial democracies, not least Canada, which has one of the highest in the world. Consequently, New Delhi will likely continue to demand the burden of adjustment falls on the developed west and the right of developing countries to consume a greater share of the global carbon budget, and to expect richer countries to finally meet and scale up failed promises of climate finance while opposing measures such as imposing carbon border tariffs vis-a-vis developing economies.

Finally, the rise of militant Hindu nationalism and India's democratic regression accentuates traditional diplomatic challenges. Officially, Ottawa maintains that "Canada will continue to engage with India on issues related to security, democracy, pluralism and human rights" (Xing [2023](#)). In general, however, western governments demonstrate conspicuous silence regarding these developments. Various factors are at play: lip service to purported values, diplomatic prudence, reasons of state. It may also reflect belated recognition in many western democracies of their own democratic challenges, making it hard to criticize others without subjecting themselves to similar censure. Such reticence will stoke political cynicism, however.

The rise of the BJP in recent years makes the politics of the Indian diaspora more difficult to handle too. On the one hand, the willingness of politicians in Canada to support the political demands of diasporic communities will always remain a diplomatic flashpoint. Facing pressure from local Sikh organizations to support the farmers' protest movement in India in 2020, Prime Minister Trudeau stated: "...Canada will always be there to defend the rights of peaceful protesters. We believe in the process of dialogue. We've reached out through multiple means to the Indian authorities to highlight our concerns..." (Roy [2022](#)). His comments provoked an official rebuke from New Delhi: "We have seen some ill-informed comments by Canadian leaders relating to farmers in India. Such comments are unwarranted, especially when pertaining to the internal affairs of a democratic country...". If such "unacceptable interference" continued, it would have a "seriously damaging" impact on bilateral ties (Roy [2022](#)).

Diasporic efforts to support long-distance separatism naturally provoke a stronger reaction. The decision by Sikhs for Justice to host an unofficial referendum in Toronto in 2022, to create a Khalistan homeland, compelled the Indian High Commissioner to ask the Trudeau government to suppress the event, saying it was illegally raising funds and promoting secession. Global Affairs responded by saying Ottawa did not support the referenda or bid to secede, but protected freedom of expression (Fife and Chase [2022](#)). Irked, New Delhi subsequently issued a travel advisory, following the desecration of a local Hindu temple in Toronto by Khalistani sympathizers. It warned Indian nationals of "a sharp increase in incidents of hate crimes, sectarian violence and anti-India activities in Canada... [since] these perpetrators have not been brought to justice so far... [Indian nationals] are advised to exercise due caution and remain vigilant" (Woods [2022](#)). Regardless of the government in office, New Delhi perceives such overtures as infringing on its domestic affairs and violating the principle of non-interference, using language similar to Beijing.

On the other hand, though, many supporters of Hindu nationalism are seeking to curtail academic freedom and freedom of expression in Canada. Speakers, events and publications deemed too critical of the current BJP government, either its politics or policies, increasingly suffer harassment, intimidation and calls to cancel events (Xing [2023](#)). Writers and scholars that belong either to lower caste groups or religious minorities confront greater risks. The frequent denunciation of opposition toward Hindu nationalist excesses as “anti-Hindu” and “Hinduphobic” parallels attempts to conflate criticisms of Israeli government policy as anti-Semitism. Given the rising number of new immigrants from India, the doubling of the number of self-identified Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs since 2001 (Smith [2022](#)) and growing communal tensions in India, such conflicts are likely to grow.

Concluding Remarks

India occupies a pivotal role in Canada’s new Indo-Pacific strategy for many good reasons. Its developmental trajectory, and twin status as the most populous country and largest democracy in the world, draws the attention of many countries. The size and influence of the Indian diaspora in Canada, and opportunities to expand diplomatic, economic and strategic ties, are significant and growing. Hence there exist many incentives for political leaders and public servants, and academics, business actors and civic organizations, to pursue cooperation and explore prospects at various levels in multiple realms. Courting India through a whole-of-society approach makes sense.

Yet the framework of Canada’s Indo-Pacific strategy, which champions democracy and pluralism and the norms and rules of existing international order, poses two major challenges.

The first concerns the commitment to pluralism and democracy. Elections remain competitive in India. A national coalition of opposition parties might unseat the BJP and form a new government in New Delhi in the 2024 general election. Nonetheless, the severe erosion of civil liberties, institutional autonomy and minority rights in India over the last decade generates serious questions about its status as the world’s largest democracy. The recent disqualification of the Congress leader Rahul Gandhi from parliament, following a controversial judicial order from the home state of Prime Minister Modi (Vishwanath [2023](#)), suggests the BJP perceives a threat to its rule. Altering the electoral playing field, by preventing opposition politicians from contesting and casting doubt on the integrity of polls, is a key aspect of democratic backsliding. The unwillingness of the Modi government to readily accept potential electoral defeat in 2024, echoing recent events in Brazil and the United States, thus cannot be ruled out.

Hence efforts by Ottawa to proclaim that a commitment to democracy and pluralism distinguishes Canada and its partners in the Indo-Pacific vis-a-vis China face obvious risks. Recent calls by the United States for mutual learning and frank talk (Blinken [2021](#)) are a salutary belated corrective to previous efforts of “democracy promotion” by the west on the 20th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. Moreover, many western democracies exhibit serious backsliding, making it hard to scrutinize others without subjecting ourselves to similar criticism. But such political exchanges will likely occur through quiet diplomacy. A minimal conception of democracy, placing the greatest value on parties competing for power through competitive elections, will likely become the litmus test for international recognition and club membership. The participation of many autocratic leaders at the 2023 Summit of Democracies, hosted by the United States despite its own deficits, underscores this selective morality and political hypocrisy. Civil liberties, minority rights and the rule of law face growing threats around the world. But realpolitik rules.

The second challenge in courting India, distinct but related, concerns the existing international order. Ottawa and New Delhi share growing concern over China’s willingness to forcefully assert its economic, military and strategic power. Despite its desire to embrace new partners in the Indo-Pacific, however, Canada appears far more committed to maintaining the post-1945 international order shaped by the interests of western industrial democracies of the North Atlantic. Indeed, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and increasingly aggressive posture by China has reinforced its Atlanticist self-image and traditional alliances. In contrast, despite growing strategic ties with the US, India seems committed to enhancing its strategic autonomy vis-a-vis great powers and fashioning a multipolar international order whose norms, institutions and practices no longer favor the interests of the west. Governments in New Delhi, regardless of the political ideologies, are unlikely to fully embrace a policy of “friend-shoring” in trade, investment and developmental aid, join formal security alliances or frame international conflicts simply through a simple prism that pits democracy versus autocracy. Whether the pursuit of strategic autonomy is sustainable given the growing clash between China and the US remains an open question. But India and other rising powers from the South are more likely to believe that a new cold war would make it harder to address the severe challenges posed by global poverty, late development and climate change equitably.

Endnotes

¹

Parts of this section draw from an earlier report I wrote (Ruparelia [2021b](#)).

²

The remaining six union territories, ruled directly by New Delhi, do not have legislative assemblies.

³

Based on 2011 Census figures.

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