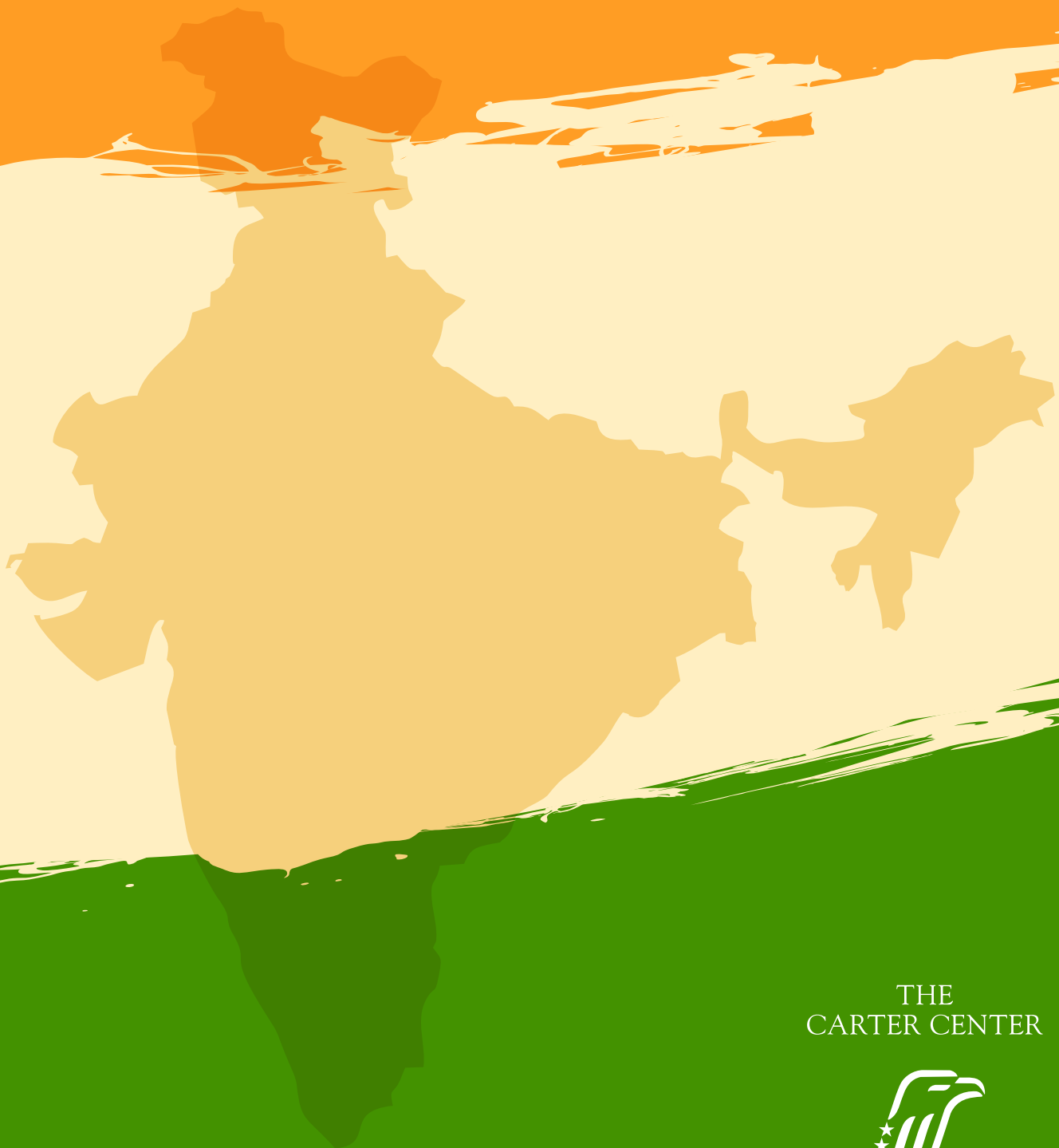


INDIA POLICY
COMMENTARY

Containing Illiberalism: The U.S.-India Partnership and the Ukraine War

By Harry Verhoeven
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The Russia-Ukraine conflict is leading analysts to rethink the fault lines of global politics. Speculation is rife about how Vladimir Putin's invasion will reshape international relations. In U.S. policy circles, there is palpable relief after the forging of a bipartisan thrust to isolate the Kremlin, especially because Europe has closely aligned itself with Washington's outlook. Confronting Russia is a familiar scenario for North Atlantic strategists, allowing NATO to rediscover its *raison d'être* and sparking renewed confidence as commentators discern a "[revival of the West](#)". The implications of the latter go beyond Ukraine: The Biden administration has sought to bring North American and European allies closer and to signal resolve vis-à-vis Xi Jinping's Chinese Communist Party, which appears no less nationalistic and defiant of Western ideas of international order than Putin. In this reading of the stakes of the Ukraine war, peace and stability in both Eurasia and the so-called "Indo-Pacific" depend on the unity of the Atlantic.

Yet, as comfortable as such framing might be for some, it risks misreading how constituencies around the globe view the current geopolitical moment. Seen from the world of the Indian Ocean —home to about a third of humanity — the idea of an inevitable New Cold War is profoundly puzzling and disconcerting. Washington has doubled down on framing the choice as one between, on the one hand, a rules-based, liberal international order rooted in strong democratic foundations, and, on the other, the revisionism and state capitalism of a club of authoritarians headed by Beijing and Moscow. But for a diverse gamut of Indian Ocean states — Indonesia, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, and others — such bifurcation makes little sense. If anything, it amplifies contradictions in U.S. foreign policy.

India is a case in point. It is a much-wooed partner as the U.S. seeks to consolidate a democratic bloc in defense of a rules-based open world against Russia and China. [Renewed courting](#) by U.S. officials aspires to get Delhi to condemn Putin's invasion as well as to sever some of its commercial and defense ties to Moscow and to firm up its membership in the so-called Quad, which the U.S. sees as vital to protecting its interests. Since Russia began its invasion, no state outside Europe has received such lavish attention from Washington as India. But for Delhi, the problem is not merely that up to two-thirds of its military equipment is Russian-designed. American strategic frameworks have usually sat at odds with India's [foreign policy traditions](#) and have generated profound economic and security problems for Delhi, complicating U.S.-India relations over issues such as military assistance to Pakistan or sanctions on Iran. Like [many other states in the world of the Indian Ocean](#), India's strong attachment to sovereignty and its deep-seated distrust of superpowers with universalist ideologies has for years bedeviled a closer U.S.-Indian partnership, despite shared apprehensions over China or the Taliban.

Fundamentally, India is not a liberal state. This matters because so much of the self-image of U.S. foreign policy remains wedded to the belief that international order must rest on liberal-democratic domestic foundations and that such a liberal order must stimulate the spread of democracy to places where it has not taken hold. This is an idea that is alien to Indian foreign policy, yet it has been enthusiastically resuscitated in Washington in recent months.

Democratic backsliding and the corrosion of the rule of law in India sharpen such contradictions. If U.S. global dominance and influence has never had more than a handful of

sympathizers in India, liberal democracy seems to have a dwindling number of domestic Indian supporters, too, as India's political institutions, media, and judiciary are failing beleaguered minorities — especially its tens of millions of Muslim and Christian citizens. Within the Hindu nationalist movement, Putin's combination of ruthless personal leadership, strident conservatism in the face of Western “moral relativism,” and the prioritization of top-down state-building has found many admirers. The [#IStandwithPutin hashtag trending on social media](#) is but the latest example. Delhi's attachment to either liberal democracy or liberal internationalism runs increasingly thin of late.

The realities of [the fragility of the U.S.-India partnership](#) in view of divergent understandings of the sources of political order, domestically and internationally, warrant critical reflection. What compromises is Washington willing to accept in pursuit of regional alliances to contain Russia and China? During the 20th century Cold War, successive administrations showed themselves willing to overlook the dismal democratic and human rights record of many American allies in the name of arresting Soviet advances. That period is littered with illustrations of how Washington's preoccupation with global bipolarity blinded it to disturbing local and regional realities and generated blowback — such as Iran's Islamic Revolution or the rise of Al-Qaeda from the rubble of Cold War fighting in Afghanistan. From Zaire to Indonesia, U.S. allies exploited their privileged relations with Washington to get away with muzzling opponents and marginalizing minorities. This was ethically troubling and hurt America strategically, as it undercut the United States' credibility as a liberal hegemon. The inconsistencies of that period still inform how African, Asian, and Middle Eastern publics perceive U.S. foreign policy today.

While the challenges posed by Putin's Russia and Xi's China are considerable, the risks of repeating Cold War mistakes, in the relationship with Narendra Modi's India and elsewhere, are plentiful. Especially in the Indian Ocean region, which has a [long and complex history with liberal order, as colleagues and I document in a new book](#), Western governments should recognize how much damage was done by the contradictions between encouraging democratization and the cynical *realpolitik* that abandoned human rights. Some will argue that today's geopolitical interests are too significant to allow much historical nuance in foreign policy vis-à-vis India and other Indian Ocean states. But managing alliances without downplaying the problems posed by the partners' illiberalism is precisely a question of strategic stakes and not just moral ones.

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Prof Harry Verhoeven teaches at the School of International and Public Affairs of Columbia University. He is a Senior Research Scholar at the Center on Global Energy Policy and a Senior Adviser to the European Institute of Peace. Among other books, he recently published with Dr Anatol Lieven [Beyond Liberal Order. States, Societies and Markets in the Global Indian Ocean](#). He was also the editor of the recent [Marx and Lenin in Africa and Asia: Socialism\(s\) and Socialist Legacies](#).

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

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