

# Democracy and politics in India: The foreign policy wildcard

For decades now, democracy in India has posed what Atul Kohli describes as an “intellectual puzzle.” On the international stage, India’s democracy—overt commitment to rule of law and respect in the main for its constitutional values—has marked it out as exceptional. Yet the practice of its democracy, most prominently through its politics, remains a challenge. In recent years, India’s politics has been marked by frequent and staggering corruption scandals and, at times, by politically fomented violence and wildly irresponsible populism. Thus, while India’s democracy remains one of its dominant characteristics internationally, its political life is mostly a “black box” to all but the best-informed observers. Both influence its foreign policy, but not as casual observers might expect.

India’s internal affairs overwhelmingly consume most of its political bandwidth, leaving little capacity for geo-strategic and foreign policy planning. The fragmented, internally oriented nature of its exceptionally disputatious politics makes foreign policy formulation, particularly any fresh departure, difficult. In addition, the increasing role of regional parties, through coalition politics, has had immediate effects for India’s bilateral relations, particularly in its neighbourhood.

## DOMESTIC POLICIES

India’s current government (United Progressive Alliance) led by the Congress has been marked by a series of scams and grave corruption scandals, an inability to check rising prices, and serious failures on the domestic security front. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, initially welcomed for his outstanding calibre and high personal integrity, has suffered a loss of credibility among the Indian public for lack of effective action in the face of his government’s mistakes. The statements affirming a commitment to fighting corruption and reactionary reshuffling of ministers in tainted positions has

BY POORVI CHITALKAR  
AND DAVID M. MALONE

Poorvi Chitalkar holds a Professional Development Award at Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC). David Malone, president of IDRC, was previously Canada’s High Commissioner to India, and is author of *Does the Elephant Dance? Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy*, which was published in 2011 by Oxford University Press.

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failed to inspire much confidence amid observers at home or abroad.

At the same time, however, his government’s economic policies resulted in India successfully weathering the global recession and sustaining high levels of growth. This impressive economic performance meant no small rewards for India—not only did it make Delhi an attractive economic partner for all major powers, but also brought with it considerable political clout in international affairs. For example, India’s voice is an important one in the G20, as it strives to address the challenges of the global economic and financial crisis. It has also allowed India to mobilize major powers in its favour on issues of national interest, such as pressure on Pakistan to end cross-border terrorism.

## FRAGMENTED POLITICS

In the early years after independence, dominance of the Congress party trans-

lated into a largely unified foreign policy ideology. The 1970s and ‘80s witnessed the decline of Congress hegemony and opened up greater space for regional interests in national politics—a phenomenon that was greatly accelerated by Indira Gandhi’s authoritarian declaration of emergency rule (1975–77). Since the 1990s, political parties that appeal to ethnic, linguistic, and caste identities have proliferated and consequently coalition governments based on fragile alliances have become the norm.

On the one hand, political fragmentation has had a positive impact in allowing divergent views on India’s role in the world to emerge in public debate. However, on occasion, this trend has constrained the formulation and practice of an effective foreign policy. Coalition governments require political parties constantly to “concede, coalesce, compromise, and come to a consensus.” This makes decision making, including that on foreign policy, a tedious and often exasperating process. When faced with vital foreign policy decisions, such as parliamentary ratification of the India–USA civil nuclear cooperation agreement of 2008, a number of parties view the options strictly in terms of domestic political advantage, in that case almost resulting in a no-confidence vote against the government. Nonetheless, there has been considerable continuity of foreign policy in India between governments claiming to have nothing in common. For example, although differing on several vital national issues, both the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party maintained a similar stance on improving relations with Pakistan during their respective periods in power.

## ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AND DOMESTIC INSECURITY

Since the economic reforms two decades ago, India has generated enviable economic growth. Despite this, almost

60 percent of India's population still lives below the poverty line. Poverty and intense inequality are seriously affecting India's internal security, notably by fueling the Naxalite (Maoist) insurgency paralyzing up to a third of its districts and exposing the schizophrenic path of economic development in India. Deep-rooted social and economic inequalities have also encouraged several secessionist movements, notably in India's ethnically diverse northeast, which believes itself to be both neglected by Delhi and at times brutalized by its security forces. Moreover, while national programs such as the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme are harbingers of progress, too much Union money for poverty alleviation is still siphoned off as it flows through state governments.

These and other domestic security concerns not only monopolize the attention of Indian decision-makers, but also have implications for India's relationship with neighbours who are intimately interested, if not directly involved, in many of these insurgencies. The north-east of India (where China claims the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh as its own) is awash with light weapons flowing in from China—without any hint of government support—and through international trafficking via Myanmar and Bangladesh. India's relationship with Myanmar, including its controversial support for the military regime there, rests mostly on strategic interests relating to its northeast. The insurgency in Kashmir and the cross-border terrorism emanating from groups located in Pakistan are the most persistent irritants in the India-Pakistan relationship and a source of instability for South Asia as a whole.

## **CORRUPTION**

Another significant risk to India's international standing stemming from its political life is the scale and brazen nature of corruption (see David M. Malone, "Corruption Can Entail India's Global Image," *The Hindu*, May 9, 2011). The Commonwealth Games of 2010, long built up as an opportunity for India

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to impress the world, instead offered a bemused global media the spectacle of shocking cost overruns, the result of egregious incompetence by political cronies with responsibility for oversight of the event, forcing an apparently reluctant government to initiate inquiries leading to indictments relating to these disturbing circumstances. Only months later, leaked tapes of discussions involving a number of leading Indians made clear the extent and distasteful nature of the nexus between a number of business leaders and national politicians. The tangential involvement of prominent media figures exacerbated public dismay. And the 2G Spectrum scandal over new licences for mobile phone services, if allegations prove true, places the others in the shade, in terms of the scale of financial misappropriation. While corruption is an unpleasant fact throughout much of Asia and the world, India's repeated brushes with large-scale corruption involving huge sums of money (as, for example, in the Indian Premier League cricket funding scandal of 2010) have disconcerted its friends.

## **THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN**

Since the turn of the millennium, the media has provided the principal arena for intellectual and policy debate on Indian foreign policy, with the government's policies and positions rarely spared. But while criticism of government is a hallmark of democracy everywhere, intensely nationalist voices in the media have sometimes proved an obstacle for India in moving forward constructively on relations with its two most potentially troublesome neighbours—China and Pakistan. India's relationship with China is complex, with potential for cooperation in the economic sphere but contentious in other areas, particularly as both vie for influence in Asia. When the two clash, as they often do, the sensationalism of India's free press sometimes leads India to overreact to developments that China's highly controlled media system can tackle more subtly. Relations with Pakistan have historically been fraught, and frequent incidents of terrorism in India with proven or suspected links to Pakistan have escalated the tension. Although both sides occasionally attempt to negotiate and solve differences, there is strong resistance from many Indian quarters to "let go of the past" so as to move forward on these relations.

Domestic politics play a key role in determining India's positions on "hot button" international issues. India's colonial past remains a vivid factor in Indian diplomacy today and the result has been excessive touchiness at times. Climate change is a case in point: in the days leading up to the Copenhagen negotiations, India initially maintained its position of not offering any legally binding emissions reductions; however, within the government, India's Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh argued in favour of flexibility, proposing an offer to reduce carbon intensity and be a "part of the solution to the problem." He was severely challenged by India's negotiators (among several others) for such concessions without obtaining reciprocity from other countries (China's unilaterally offered

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the process of investigating major government corruption scandals. Judgments of the Court have made increasing reference to corruption. In 2010, its decisions referenced more than 50 instances of government corruption. It took on the role of overseeing the investigation into the telecom licensing scandal, which is said to have cost the Indian government \$39 billion in lost revenue. It has also ordered the public distribution system to distribute free grain to the poor rather than leave the grain to rot and be eaten by rats. In March 2011, it forced the official appointed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to head the Central Vigilance Commission, which is mandated to lead India's fight against corruption, to resign because he was implicated in the telecom licensing scandal. Even more recently, the Supreme Court pressured the Central Bureau of Investigation to investigate allegations of corruption involving the Commonwealth Games.


Our point is that these aggressive responses of the Supreme Court to corruption operate in the realm of legal adversarialism and must be viewed as a reflection of the idea that law in India is

now viewed not just as an instrument for development but as a measure of India's development.

### CONCLUSION

At present, it might be tempting to see the Supreme Court of India as a great saviour in the fight against corruption. Unfortunately, however, legal adversarialism as a technique for challenging government and bureaucratic corruption in India has its limitations. For in India, there are genuine concerns about corruption among the justices on the Supreme Court. Clearly, corruption of this sort poses a threat to claims about advances toward rule of law in the development of India. Legal adversarialism is not, however, capable of addressing corruption among the judiciary. The present government in India believes, and we concur, that what India ultimately needs is something like a judicial council to enforce ethical and best practices among its senior judges and punish judges for corruption. This sort of judicial council run by senior judges exists in most other common-law countries. However, it is not clear in the case of India

who would establish or operate such a professional body.

Ironically, if India does establish a judicial council with the objective of combatting corruption among the judiciary, such a council may also attempt to regulate the other behaviours of Supreme Court justices. As we noted above, the Supreme Court of India developed its unique model of public-interest litigation by adapting the adversarial system in ways that facilitate the technique of legal adversarialism as a way to challenge government and bureaucratic corruption. Judges on the Supreme Court were the authors of these distinctive features of Indian legal adversarialism. In many common-law countries, including Canada, it is likely that a judicial council would have viewed such innovations as unprofessional and a compromise on the impartial role that judges are required to assume in an adversarial legal system. Our point is that a judicial council may prevent the Supreme Court of India from continuing in its role of challenging corruption on the ground that fulfilling this role requires judges to act unprofessionally. 

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targets notwithstanding). India's negotiators too were also routinely castigated for caving into foreign pressure at the slightest hint of a conciliatory stance.


### DEMOCRACY AS INDIA'S "SOFT-POWER"

India's recent diplomacy suggests that Delhi is sensitive to the value of democracy in developing ties that bind. India's partnership with Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) is being described as a "natural one" between leading, market-oriented democracies. India's democracy could indeed provide Delhi with a degree of soft power advantage in the Asia-Pacific region, which is nervous about new Chinese assertiveness, along side the continued strong role of the United States

in the region aiming to constrain Chinese influence. C. Raja Mohan notes that "a future balance of power in which democratic India constitutes a principal pole would better protect liberal values embodied by Indian society than a future order in which an authoritarian China enjoyed hegemony in Asia."

### THE PATH TO GLOBAL POWER

India is well on its way to meeting the aspirations of its people to achieve global significance. It is not just a member of the G20 but, indeed, a leading one. Prime Minister Singh, even when his government has stumbled domestically, has been an effective spokesperson for his country internationally. Nevertheless, India needs to tend to its domestic secur-

ity challenges not only for internal reasons, but because too many insurgencies and terrorist incidents can only undermine its credibility internationally and slow its rise to meaningful global power status. As Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has recognized, some of the challenges relate more to failures in the country's economic development, and in the equitable distribution of its gains, than in essentially political grievances. 

### Note

*This article is drawn from a more scholarly and longer article, "Democracy, Politics and Indian Foreign Policy," (2011), vol. 7 no. 1 Canadian Foreign Policy Journal, 75-91.*