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The European Union and India: Partners in Democracy Promotion?

The Arab Spring has reinvigorated discussions about strengthening the EU's democratisation efforts. In this context, one may consider whether India could be an attractive partner for the EU in democracy promotion in Asia and elsewhere. It is not only the world's largest democracy but also a "strategic partner" of the EU, and it is willing to strengthen cooperation on regional and global levels. Shared values and adherence to democracy were seen as natural common ground for closer cooperation since the EU and India took on strategic cooperation in 2000. As early as the second EU–India Summit in 2001, both sides agreed to "step up efforts to promote democracy and to address human-rights issues at the international and bilateral levels".¹ In 2003, they reiterated their commitment to "work together to promote pluralistic democracy in the world by laying special emphasis on democratic policies and practice".² A special section on "Democracy and Human Rights" was included in a major document on a strategic partnership signed in 2005 in which both sides committed to "look together for possible synergies and initiatives to promote human rights and democracy".³ Since then, however, democratisation has been silenced from the ongoing dialogue, and not many examples of the practical implementation of those aims can be found. In fact, democracy seems to have become more often a point of friction between the two than an area for cooperation.

India has been criticized by the EU and the U.S. for years for its cooperation with Myanmar's military junta, silence during Sri Lanka's final military assault on the Tamil Tigers in 2009 and its reluctance to impose stricter sanctions against Iran. The differences were more clearly displayed last year while the Arab revolutions were unfolding in North Africa. First, India, which holds a non-permanent seat at the UNSC, together with China and Russia abstained from voting on Resolution 1973 on Libya in March 2011 and then abstained again

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¹ "Joint Communiqué: Second India-EU Summit", New Delhi, 23 November, 2001.

² "4th EU–India Summit: Joint Press Statement", New Delhi, 29 November 2003.

³ "The India-EU Strategic Partnership. Joint Action Plan", New Delhi, 7 September 2005.

on a resolution on Syria in October 2011. As further evidence of the divergences, India differed with the EU and the U.S. when it supported a “sovereign Palestine state” during discussions in the UNGA in September and joined “other nations in calling for an immediate end to the U.S. embargo against Cuba” on 25 October. Indeed, India is a country that disagrees with the West the most on important votes in the UN. For example, in 2010 the coincidence of voting between India and the U.S. was only 25.4%, far below the average for all nations (41.6%) and especially when compared to other democracies in Europe (e.g., the UK–74.2%, France–71.4% and Poland–61.7%). As these examples show, although India is proud to claim to be the biggest democracy in the world, it can hardly be seen as a partner in “democracy promotion”, at least in the sense understood in the West.

This analysis tries to explain the reasons for these differences, and suggests a realistic approach that could eventually bring the EU and India closer together in this delicate area of cooperation. Among the questions it seeks to answer are: Is this division between both really so wide and what can they do to try to bridge the gap; what does India think about democracy promotion and how is this approach different from a European perspective; should the EU see it as a problem or an asset and a new opportunity; how can India and the EU move forward in this area despite the remaining differences; and, is India ready to take its acclaim for democracy beyond symbolic declarations and use it as a true cornerstone of a strategic partnership?

Ideological Divide

Even though India and the EU are democracies, many misunderstandings and unjustified expectations are created by assumptions related to that label. The differences between India’s and the EU’s concepts of democracy promotion are not minor. They evolve rather from deep ideological divisions founded on unique historical records, distant civilisational values, and diverging worldviews. A post-colonial country, India has an inherently limited acceptance for European moral preaching and incursions in other countries’ internal affairs. As the *spiritus movens* behind the Bandung Declaration (1955), India adheres strictly to fundamental principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, such as state sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-intervention and non-interference. India, which used to aspire to the role of spokesman for and leader of developing countries, was an unequivocal critic of Western policies, which were seen often as imperialistic and interventionist.

India and the EU evolve from distant socio-political settings and their foreign policies fall under different paradigms. Whereas the EU is a post-modern political entity sharing sovereignty with its Member States, India is a pure example of a traditional Westphalian state, protecting jealously its strategic autonomy. While the EU tends to be a civilian or “normative power”, prioritizing universal values over state interests, India is very much a hard power concerned with national self-interest. Europe, which grew from Greek philosophy and Christianity, tends to put an individual human being at the centre of

international relations; India is based on eastern philosophies, and Hinduism attaches more attention to the group, of which the state is the only subject in world politics.

These ideological differences bear important practical implications. For instance, in attitudes towards humanitarian interventions, the “Responsibility to Protect” concept, the International Criminal Court or other actions that may appear to be meddling in other countries’ internal matters, India stands closer to such countries as China or Russia than it does to Western democracies. India and the EU differ in both defining democracy and understanding the concept of “democracy promotion”. While the EU believes in the export of democracy, India is of the opinion that no ideology or form of governance can be imposed from the outside, rather it must be a home-grown phenomenon. As recently stressed by Indian National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon, “a people cannot be forced to be free or to practice democracy”.⁴ This means India also dislikes the term “democracy promotion”, which implies the active imposition of a new system. Moreover, for India the notion bears strong negative sentiments because of its close links with the U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003. Thus, the minimum change needed to get more cooperation from India in this area would be to change the vocabulary and talk rather about democracy “assistance”, “support”, “strengthening”, “building”, etc.

Models of democracy assistance also differ in practice. As an Indian scholar once observed, “the EU has preferred a ‘bottom-up’ approach that essentially concentrates on civil society and NGOs, which have been the main channels and recipients of aid from the European Commission”.⁵ India, on the contrary, prefers rather a “top-down” approach and acts only on request from a partner government and mainly through official structures. This explains why India is so active in democracy-building in Afghanistan (at the request of the government of Hamid Karzai) and not in Myanmar (where the military junta didn’t want this kind of help). When an American president argues that “speaking up for those who cannot do so for themselves is not interfering in the affairs of other countries”⁶, it is hardly a convincing argument for his Indian partners.

This ideological difference was recently and clearly displayed in reaction to the crisis in Libya. While European countries pushed for decisive international intervention, India as a non-permanent member of the UNSC eventually abstained from voting on Resolution 1973—the “no-fly zone” over Libya (2011). Today, India feels misled and misused by that decision. From Delhi’s perspective, the international mandate to “protect the civilian population” in Libya eventually turned out to be a tool to impose regime change, since NATO clearly had sided with one party to the civil war and destroyed Qaddafi forces. A situation in

⁴ Shri Shivshankar Menon, National Security Advisor, “16th Prem Bhatia Memorial Lecture 2011: India and the Global Scene”, India International Centre, New Delhi, 11 August 2011.

⁵ Rajendra K. Jain, *The European Union and Democracy Building in South Asia*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2009, p. 12.

⁶ President Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President to the Joint Session of the Indian Parliament in New Delhi”, Parliament House, New Delhi, India, 8 November 2010.

which a UN resolution gives *carte blanche* to the use of force and subsequently loses control of its execution is unacceptable not only to China or Russia but also to India. The words of the National Security Advisor leave no doubts about where India stands in this regard: “We have seen how high-sounding phrases like the ‘right to protect’ are selectively invoked and brutally applied in the pursuit of self-interest, giving humanitarian and international intervention a bad name”⁷. It is this context in which one should see India’s subsequent abstention from voting in the Security Council on sanctions on Syria in October 2011. It is, however, important to stress that India’s latest decision to vote in favour of a Western-backed UNSC resolution on Syria on 4 February (vetoed by Russia and China) shows that this traditional approach is negotiable.

Pragmatic Foreign Policy

The times when Indian foreign policy could be described as driven by idealism, as it was under the first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (1947-1964), are long gone. After the end of the Cold War, the country’s policy took more clearly a path of pragmatism and realism driven by national self-interest. Expecting this emerging global power that is dependent on imports of 75% of its energy sources to cut cooperation with Iran—the third-biggest source of oil—because it has low standards of democracy is naive. India is already engaged in tough competition with autocratic China for influence and energy sources and cannot also risk alienating neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, Nepal or Sri Lanka for the sake of democracy and human rights. Facing fundamental development challenges at home, India cannot afford the luxury to stand for democratic values in its relations with African or South American partners. These economic and security interests weigh the most and are not exceptional compared to Western standards. As one good observer of India, Christophe Jaffrelot, frankly put it, “cynicism in international politics is nothing new. The West has supported autocratic regimes when it suited its interests [...] The emerging countries are doing the same. They promote democracy when it suits them”.⁸

India doesn’t see the EU’s democratisation policy as value-based and sincere, rather it sees it as a cover and justification for the attainment of some other political or economic gains. Indian politicians have long been frustrated by double standards in the West’s dealings with democracy. During the Cold War, the West had a closer relationship with autocratic Pakistan than with democratic India. After 1989, the West chose communist China as a major partner in Asia, and during the “war on terror”, the West’s democratisation policy was contradicted by political and economic support extended to authoritarian regimes in Pakistan and Central Asian republics. In addition to this, India finds baseless Western pressure on India to cut cooperation with undemocratic Myanmar or Iran when at the same time the EU is doing business with Saudi Arabia or China.

⁷ Shri Shivshankar Menon, National Security Advisor, “16th Prem Bhatia Memorial Lecture 2011: India and the Global Scene”, India International Centre, New Delhi, 11 August 2011.

⁸ Christophe Jaffrelot, “Why Did India Turn its Back on Syria?”, *Real Clear World*, 12 October 2011.

Considering the latest example, many Indians are suspicious about why NATO was so eager to intervene in Libya when it is less willing to do the same in Syria, Somalia or Yemen, places where the civilian population is also at very grave risk. That Libya is an oil-rich country with barely 6 million people dispersed over a huge territory, making it a relatively easy target, does not give credibility to the official Western rhetoric. Thus, whereas European citizens may feel proud of their countries' moral stand on Libya and other Arab revolutions, Indians see in that nothing more than pragmatic and interest-driven foreign policy and just another example of Western hypocrisy. In a recent address at the UN, the prime minister of India said, "we will succeed if our efforts have legitimacy and are pursued not just within the framework of [the] law but also the spirit of the law".⁹

The discrepancies between the official European rhetoric and *realpolitik* offer a valuable lesson for Indian policymakers. India is no stranger to using moral values to justify its foreign actions. Humanitarian intervention, viewed with suspicion today by Indian policymakers, was first used by India itself in 1971 when it intervened in the Pakistan civil war and contributed to the creation of an independent Bangladesh, citing as a reason for its military action the need to protect civilians and stop the carnage taking place close to its borders. Other examples of foreign military expeditions—in 1988 in the Maldives and in 1987–1989 in Sri Lanka—were similarly justified on moral grounds.

In recent years, the democracy argument is being more often deliberately employed in Indian foreign policy. As observed by the Indian prime minister, Indians "have an obligation to history and mankind to show that pluralism works. India must show that democracy can deliver development and empower the marginalized. Liberal democracy is the natural order of political organization in today's world. All alternate systems, authoritarian and majoritarian in varying degrees, are an aberration."¹⁰ India provides assistance to young democracies in its neighbourhood: Afghanistan, Nepal, the Maldives and Bangladesh. Aid managed by the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) or the Electoral Commission of India reaches many more countries in Africa and Asia. At a time when many western leaders decline to meet with the Dalai Lama, the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader, so as not to provoke outrage from Beijing, India continues to host him and the Tibetan government in exile on its territory. India was also one of the 10 founding members of the Community of Democracies in 2000 and co-founder of the UN Democracy Fund in 2005. In the aftermath of the democratic revolutions in North Africa, the chief of the Electoral Commission of India made a visit to Egypt in April 2011 and promised to provide assistance during its presidential elections.

India strategically recalls its democratic status when it deals with Western democracies or wants to upgrade its global status. Thus, while the EU talks about

⁹ Manmohan Singh, "PM's address at the 66th Session of the United Nations General Assembly", New York, 24 September 2011.

¹⁰ Manmohan Singh, "PM's speech at India Today Conclave", New Delhi, 25 February 2005.

democratisation at the country level, India insists more on democratisation of the global governance system, seeking in it the chance to acquire permanent membership on the UN Security Council. India is home to the largest population on Earth of people living in poverty and doubts in the European belief that democracy necessarily leads to development. Facing a number of internal protests and manoeuvring between the conflicting needs of various groups, India sometimes looks jealously at the efficiency of Chinese authoritarian rule in introducing reforms. The Indian prime minister has pointed to the suggestions of Mahbub ul Haq, a UNDP expert, that “we must view democracy not as a means to an end, namely development, but as an end in itself”.¹¹ India prioritizes the development agenda over democratisation policy because it is concerned that the new conditionality on international aid can hamper its progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Flawed Democracy

Another reason why India is not so active in democracy support may be an awareness of its own weaknesses. Although it is the world’s largest democracy, it is surely not the most perfect. According to the Democracy Index 2011, prepared by the *Economist*, India ranked 39th in the category of “flawed democracies”. In the annual Freedom House report for 2012, India was considered to be “free” but serious constraints on freedom of the Internet and press exist. The levels of corruption and criminalisation of politicians are high and protection of human rights is low. As observed in the latest Human Rights Watch report, “India, the world’s most populous democracy, continues to have a vibrant media, an active civil society, a respected judiciary, and significant human rights problems.”¹²

The most serious violations refer to the troubled Kashmir region. The heavy militarisation and pacification of the insurgency in the State of Jammu and Kashmir since the ’90s have cost the lives of thousands of people. In the summer of 2010 alone, more than 100 civilians, including children, were killed by security forces while holding largely peaceful protests against Indian rule. In August 2011, the Jammu and Kashmir Human Rights Commission confirmed reports of the unmarked graves of nearly 3,000 bodies spread around a valley. According to the 2011 report by Amnesty International, “torture and other ill-treatment, extrajudicial executions, deaths in custody and administrative detentions remained rife”.¹³ Impunity for abuses and violations of human rights is also widespread in other parts of India that are dealing with separatist movements or Maoist insurgencies.

These internal challenges limit India’s options in foreign policy. Human Rights Watch states that “despite its considerable influence, India continues to miss opportunities to raise concerns about even egregious human-rights violations in other countries or to assert leadership on human rights at the United Nations. In several cases, it has actively opposed

¹¹ Manmohan Singh, “Address at the conference on ‘Democracy, Development and Social Inclusion’”, New Delhi, 8 December 2005.

¹² *World Report 2011*, Human Rights Watch, New York 2012, p. 328.

¹³ *Amnesty International Report 2011: State of the World’s Human Rights*, London 2011, p. 166.

international efforts to pressure human-rights violators”.¹⁴ Criticism of the human-rights record in India is also often raised by the European Parliament, which is particularly concerned about the situation in Kashmir, labour rights and poor social standards.

Because India doesn't like to take lessons from outsiders regarding the many weaknesses of its democracy, it is more restrained in lecturing others. Indian leaders are more conscious of the difficulties facing democracies in developing countries and thus are more reluctant to promote it with the same firm belief characteristic of more developed societies. No sooner than when India manages to improve its standards of democracy will it embrace a more active role in supporting democracy in third countries.

Bridging the Gap

The common answer one can hear in Delhi when asked about India's position on democracy promotion is that the country is already actively pursuing this policy by providing democracy to its 1.2 billion citizens. Indeed, despite many shortcomings, India has been for decades one of only a few functioning democracies in Asia, committed to the principles of the rule of law, pluralism, and secularism. This in a country with a GDP per capita of less than \$2,000, in which almost 40% of adults cannot read or write, where there are 22 official languages, and that is home to all known religions, including the second-largest Muslim population in the world. When India gained independence in 1947 there was little hope among experts that its democratic experience would last long. Surprising to all, it not only survived (with one break between 1975–1977) but also seems even stronger and more mature than ever.

Even though Indian democracy is far from European standards in many ways, its resilience undermines theories claiming that democracy cannot function below certain GDP levels or that it is exclusively a Western concept. As Zbigniew Brzezinski once observed, “India [and Japan] demonstrate that the notions of human rights and the centrality of the democratic experiment can be valid in Asian settings as well, both in highly developed ones and in those that are still only developing”.¹⁵ The duration of this democratic experiment can be a vivid inspiration for other less-developed countries in Asia and Africa. Its failure and eventual transition to authoritarian rule would be a catastrophe and a serious setback to the state of democracy in the world.

There is still a lot India would need to improve upon in order to advance democratic standards and better empower its own people. The success of Indian democracy would not only help eradicate global poverty, empower the middle classes, stimulate the world's economy with many potential benefits for European companies but also would prove that democracy is the best system to deliver prosperity. Facing fundamental internal challenges

¹⁴ *World Report 2011*, Human Rights Watch, New York 2010, p. 319.

¹⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York: Basic Books, 1997, p. 213.

(securing energy sources, eradicating poverty, promoting inclusive growth), India, however, will have a lot of good reasons to be more concerned about itself rather than care too much about other country's political systems. Thus, it will remain predominantly inward-looking, increasingly pragmatic and self-interested in its foreign policy in the next decade or longer.

It is not to say that India cannot be seen as a potential partner in democracy assistance at the global level. It means only that both sides should be more realistic and less instrumental. To move beyond symbolic declarations about democratic values, the EU and India need first and foremost to engage in a serious dialogue, which could help acknowledge obvious differences in perceptions and approaches to democracy promotion. An open and comprehensive dialogue about democracy promotion should lead to a common, minimum understanding of the term, its aims, and mutually acceptable ways to strengthen democratic governance. It is important to also hear carefully what India has to say about democratisation policy and to be more open to its arguments. Given the fact that the majority of the developing world sees the EU's democracy efforts rather like India does, not as Europeans see themselves or would like to be seen, this dialogue with India could enrich the EU's perspective beyond Eurocentrism.

Both should treat each other as autonomous and equal partners, accept the differences and abstain from inflating unrealistic expectations. India will not change its approach to spreading democracy and will not simply subscribe to western policies of "democracy promotion". Instead of pushing India to "do it our way" and criticizing it for not doing enough, the EU needs to accept the remaining differences and see India's approach as an advantage. Because it is a country well experienced in democracy, India enjoys significant credibility and goodwill among many developing nations and could be a valuable partner in democratic transitions worldwide, allowing it to act in places where EU influences are weak.

Having different approaches to democracy support should be seen as complimentary, not contradictory. While the EU tends to have a more active democratisation policy ("export of democracy"), India prefers a more passive attitude ("promote by example"); while the former uses a "bottom-up" approach and is ready to act even without the consent of the host government, the latter applies a "top-down" approach and acts in cooperation with official government structures; as one promotes democratisation at the country level, the second insists on the democratisation of the whole international system.

To win more cooperation from India on support for democracy, the EU should show a strong commitment for a more representative and inclusive global governance system, including clear support for India's bid for a permanent membership on an expanded UN Security Council. Moreover, Prioritizing cooperation on democracy can work only as part of a broader engagement with a strengthened Strategic Partnership between the EU and India, one that encompasses economic, political, cultural, and security matters.

Small-Steps Strategy

It is also worth underlining that even the best dialogue is not enough. The EU and India need to simultaneously explore options for practical cooperation. They should join their efforts on simple democracy-related projects and start new initiatives in countries where they are already present and agree on areas of mutual concern. As one recent report correctly observed, Western powers “should start building cooperation with rising democracies through low-visibility, sustained endeavours rather than high-visibility, short-term gestures”.¹⁶ One can hope that with step-by-step cooperation, along with increased interactions and positive experiences, on non-controversial matters, both partners would be more willing to expand this cooperation to new areas and undertake more ambitious tasks in the future. This “small-steps strategy” could add real substance to the EU–India strategic partnership and demonstrate that when acting together both sides can do more good than doing so unilaterally.

There already are numerous opportunities for the EU and India to support democracy in third countries. One is assistance in organizing free and fair elections. No country other than India has such a rich experience in organizing voting for more than 700 million people. This expertise, joined with the EU specialty in elections assistance and monitoring and EU funds, could be very helpful in supporting upcoming elections in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. Both sides have independently declared their support for these processes, but it is high time they join their efforts. Support for reconstruction and stability in Afghanistan, where India is the sixth-largest bilateral donor, and the EU the biggest multilateral one, offers numerous options for joint projects, particularly in areas such as electoral and political reforms, transnational infrastructure projects, civil-service training and regional integration.¹⁷ Combining the complementing assets of India and the EU could not only make their development assistance more effective and beneficial for Afghans but also could prove to be good practice in trilateral development cooperation as encouraged by the Busan Partnership for Development Cooperation. Similarly, the EU and India can strengthen their assistance for the consolidation of democracy in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

The EU may consider supporting peace efforts in all South Asia in cooperation with India. In February 2011, the South Asian Association for Regional cooperation (SAARC) endorsed the Democracy Charter in which member states committed to “promote and preserve the values and ideals of democracy as well as democratic institutions”. This deserves to be supported by the EU through financial contributions to a regional mechanism of capacity-building and mobility within SAARC. Cooperation on security-sector reform in many countries in Africa, where both players are already involved, offers an additional platform for joint initiatives. Finally, recent democratic changes in Myanmar also have

¹⁶ Thomas Carothers, Richard Youngs, “Looking for Help: Will Rising Democracies Become International Democracy Supporters?”, *Carnegie Paper*, July 2011, p. 20.

¹⁷ See: Patryk Kugiel, “India in Afghanistan: A Valuable Partner for the West”, *PISM Policy Paper*, October 2011.

opened a new avenue for the EU and India to coordinate policies in order to support this ongoing, internal democratisation process. Since India is a neighbouring country to Myanmar and had good contacts with both the junta and the opposition, it can be a valuable partner with the EU in its effort to expand its activities in the country and bring the democratisation process to a successful end.

This list shows there are already many options in which the EU and India can cooperate to help democracy take root in other countries. In a re-invigorated discussion about democratisation efforts in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, it is important for the West to have countries such as India on its side. At the same time, Europe should be careful not to risk alienating emerging democracies with a too ideologically-biased and offensive democratisation policy. Sincere dialogue on democracy could help bridge gaps between the two and allow for small joint initiatives at first. This approach would require more courage and vision from the leaders of both the EU and India as well as more interactions between civil society, media, and peoples. In the end, no consolidation of democracies worldwide is possible without developing a common understanding and joint initiatives between the world's largest democracies.