

A Democratic Paradox: The Indo-US Strategic Partnership Amidst Weakening Democratic Values and Rising Regional Tensions

By Asif Malik

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent trip to the United States marked a new phase in Indo-US relations, underscored by key agreements spanning economy, defense, and technology.

The crux of the visit was a reiteration of the shared commitment of the United States and India to counterbalance China in the Indo-Pacific region. However, overriding concern about the visit has been about the state of democracy in India, particularly the suppression of the rights of minorities particularly the Muslims and the human rights abuses on Occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

India's globally acknowledged status as the world's largest democracy has come under intense scrutiny recently. Notable issues such as the rise of religious nationalism, escalated suppression of dissent, declining press freedom, and controversial legislation, all point towards a distressing deterioration of democratic norms and principles within the country.

The issue of minority rights and its actions in Occupied Kashmir are some of the most contentious and troubling facets of the current Indian domestic policies. India has recently witnessed an alarming surge in incidents of discrimination and violence against minorities. This includes targeted attacks against Muslims, Dalits, and other marginalized groups, often fuelled by rising religious nationalism and majoritarian politics.

Meanwhile, in Occupied Kashmir, long-standing allegations of human rights abuses persist, with reports of excessive use of force, arbitrary detentions, and restrictions on freedom of speech and movement.

The implementation of the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), along with the abrogation of Article 370 that granted autonomy to Occupied Jammu and Kashmir, have further intensified these concerns. Such issues, while domestically significant, are also resonating on the international stage, raising critical questions about India's continued commitment to democratic values and human rights.

While the 'democratic deficit' primarily impacts India itself, it inevitably does effect its image at the international stage and particularly in its relations with democratic torchbearers like the United States.

The diplomatic niceties during PM Modi's US visit did not quite align with the burgeoning concerns about India's democratic fabric. The United States, a nation that prides itself on being a staunch defender of democracy, strangely chose to gloss over the worrying signs of democratic backsliding and human rights regression in India.

It appears that the United States' strategic compromise is guided more by geopolitical considerations than by a steadfast adherence to democratic principles. The Indo-US partnership,

steered by mutual concerns about China and shared strategic interests, seems to have side-stepped these crucial issues. This deliberate oversight exposes a troubling pattern of selective democratic commitment, dominated by political expediency.

Meanwhile, during the visit of Prime Minister Modi, some of the agreements concluded between two sides included:

1. **Defense:** General Electric's Aerospace unit signed an agreement with India's state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics to co-produce F414 engines for the Indian Air Force. These will be used to power Tejas Mk-II fighter jets.
2. **Drone Technology:** After years-long negotiations, India approved a deal for the MQ-9B SeaGuardian and Sky Guardian drones.
3. **Semiconductor Production:** American memory chip firm Micron Technology committed to invest up to \$825 million in a new chip assembly plant in Gujarat. This will be the first such factory for Micron in India.
4. **Renewable Energy:** Indian solar panel maker Vikram Solar plans to invest up to \$1.5 billion in the US solar energy supply chain, beginning with a new factory in Colorado next year.
5. **Mineral Security Partnership:** India joined the US-led Global Mineral Security Partnership to create critical energy mineral supply chains.
6. **Space Exploration:** India agreed to join the US-led Artemis Accords and will work with NASA on a joint mission to the International Space Station in 2024.

Deals signed between US and India have raised eyebrows. They particularly impact the regional balance. An empowered India, which relies on the US for enhancing its defence capabilities and expanding regional footprint will be more assertive. It raises concerns in smaller South Asian states about India's hegemonic behavior. Pakistan, however, will be far more impacted than others given the entrenched rivalry between two subcontinental neighbours. The advanced drones for instance are likely to be employed along the Line of Control and Pakistan border. In an atmosphere of democratic decline, new technologies can be easily misused, particularly, in an election year in India, and potentially spark a new India-Pakistan crisis.

An equally significant aspect of PM Modi's visit was the joint statement expressing resolve against terrorism, with both nations emphasizing "concerted action against all U.N.-listed terrorist groups." As important as these counter-terrorism measures are, they should not serve as a smokescreen for overlooking the fact that India misuses this narrative against Pakistan.

This narrative, however, has not gone unchallenged. Pakistan, in particular, has expressed concern and disappointment over the unilateral and arguably skewed references to it in the India-US Joint Statement, stressing that the United States should avoid endorsing statements that fuel India's unfounded and politically charged narrative against Pakistan.

Pakistan emphasized that its counter-terrorism cooperation with the US had been progressing satisfactorily, arguing that a cooperative environment built on trust and understanding is crucial for strengthening Pakistan-US relations.

The United States, acknowledging India's strategic importance and unique strengths, must not lose sight of the ground realities. Similarly, India must not allow its alignment with the United States to override its commitment to democratic principles. Both countries' credibility, in the context of their joint endeavor to counter China's influence, depend heavily on their commitment to democracy.

While the Indo-US partnership is undeniably important for geopolitical stability, it must ensure that its pursuit of strategic interests does not undermine the fundamental democratic values that it professes to advance. This balance is critical not just for India and the United States, but also for the broader international community, including neighboring countries like Pakistan, and indeed for the global democratic order.

Notwithstanding major agreements and the clear strategic alignment with the US, India has steered clear of formally signing up as an ally. This seems to stem from India's aspiration to maintain its strategic autonomy and not be overly beholden to any single global power. The preference is to forge a partnership of equals where both sides contribute and benefit, rather than a hierarchical relationship of an ally and a principal. This strategic independence allows India to build broad-based relationships with multiple global powers, even those with differing views, and ensures India retains its flexibility in foreign policy decisions.