

## **Disintegrating Democracies: An Analysis of the United States & India**

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In the wake of numerous police brutality incidents within the United States, beginning in June 2020, protests have erupted across the United States. American citizens, along with the citizens of several countries around the world, have taken to the streets to voice their frustrations with systemic racism that disproportionately affects members of communities of color within the US. The horrific murder of George Floyd opened a Pandora's box into the hardships, which are further perpetuated by the pandemic, faced by Black Americans day to day including higher rates of job loss, lack of nutritious food and greater gaps in education inequalities (Sobo, pg. 2). However, the occurrence of these widescale demonstrations, in addition to several police departments using tear gas and gun shots to contain protests, was a public representation of the weakening of democratic principles within the oldest democracy in the world.

Meanwhile, across the globe in June 2020, protests began erupting by farmers in the province of Punjab, India due to new policies from the Indian government seeking to disrupt farmers' guaranteed profits. The new policies would place emphasis on large corporate farms, destroying the profits of individual farmers and disenfranchising them in society (Saaliq). Much like those in the US, the protests in India began on a small scale and have exponentially grown in recent months to become the world's largest protests with over 200,000 farmers from 30+ farmer organizations camping along highways leading to New Delhi, India's capital (Narayanan, pg. 1-2). And unfortunately like the US, these protests have also been met with violence. Thousands of farmers who took to the streets have been jailed and the protests themselves have been called "anti-national" by the government in attempts to suppress their voices or in some cases dismiss the farmers' concerns all together (Narayanan, pg. 7-8). The

suppression and efforts of the Indian government to demonize the protesters' voices marks signs of waning democratic principles within the largest democratic in the world.

It is evident, through both scenarios described above, that an antidote must be prescribed to prevent the dying of democratic principles within these two international superpowers.

Drawing from the softer realist perspective, I believe that democratic values in both countries would likely strengthen through a stronger partnership between the US and India because of India's importance as a counterweight to China, the accountability created through existing partnerships between both countries, and the consequences of an inconsistent relationship between both actors. In this paper, I will begin by defining the term 'democracy' and provide a key underlying assumption that frames my argument before offering comprehensive research and analysis on the three reasons that compose my central argument. Finally, I will conclude with proposing several policy prescriptions as to how the US, under a new presidential administration, should strengthen relations with India and revitalize the focus on democracy in foreign policy.

### **Definitions:**

#### *Democracy:*

When defining what areas of democracy need improvement in both countries, it is imperative that central facets of democracy are first established. Democracy is composed by several elements, such as "effective participation, equality in voting, exercising final control over the agenda, and inclusion of adults" (Dahl, 35). Effective participation refers to the idea that all members of a certain society must have the opportunity to voice their opinions about policies before they are adopted into law whereas voting equality refers to the idea that everyone must have an "equal and effective opportunity to vote" and that all votes are valued the same (Dahl, 37). Additionally, control of the agenda allows members of the society to change policies as they

see fit, through democratic processes, and the inclusion of all adults entitles citizens of a democratic society to the rights and liberties implied by the other facets of democracy listed above (Dahl, 38). In turn, a democratic society produces several beneficial outcomes including “avoid[ance] of tyranny,” and the recognition of “essential rights, general freedom, political equality, and prosperity” among others (Dahl, 45). With the protests that erupted in the US that stemmed directly from a lack of inclusion of all adults and ability for certain sects of our population to effectively participate in society, we can see that democracy has in fact been threatened within the US. Similarly, with the Indian government passing policies that directly impact the livelihood of farmers yet stifling farmers’ voices in trying to overturn these policies, we see that democracy is also being threatened in India. Thus, a larger conversation between both countries about the importance of upholding democratic principles must be pursued.

**Starting Assumption:**

To understand the validity of this argument, it is vital to assume that democracy and its principles are weakening in both countries. The rise of protests and the issues they seek to mend in both countries, as discussed above, are just the tip of the iceberg in demonstrating that the underlying fabric of democracy, upon which both actors rest, has begun to rip. There are several flagrant signs of democracy failing in New Delhi. Much of it has to do with the rise of Hindu nationalism in India’s political landscape, the significant concentration of power within the executive role, and the suppression of political opposition and the media by the Indian government. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist backing primarily from the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) have created an environment that seeks to disintegrate the very religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity that India rests upon. In 2019, the Indian national government “unilaterally nullified the constitutional semi autonomy of the Muslim-majority state

of Jammu and Kashmir,” resulting in the detention of political dissenters in Kashmir (Vaishnav). Recently, India has also passed a law that allowed migrants from India’s neighboring countries to obtain a faster route to citizenship, contingent on the fact that these migrants did not practice Islam. Turning to the concentration of power within the executive and in turn the erosion of democratic institutions, Modi has come to dominate India’s legislature while consistently escaping scrutiny from India’s legal system which avoids any “politically inconvenient cases” that may be brought forth (Vaishnav). Most notably, the Election Commission of India, an entity that is widely respected within the international realm, has begun facing rampant corruption charges. All of this serves to demonstrate the suffering of democracy within India’s borders. Lastly, data from the nonprofit Article14 has found that sedition has increased tremendously under Modi specifically towards political opponents and the media. India’s democratic backslide has been further certified through India’s decline in status from being a “free democracy” to a “partially free democracy” in the Freedom House annual report on global political rights and liberties (Repucci & Slipowitz).

The US’ struggle with democracy comes as no surprise. Though many look to President Trump’s administration, in which extreme nationalism and populism began to arise, as the start of weakening democratic principles, several historical forces have also been at play that culminated in threatening democracy in the US. Such forces include globalization, a phenomenon that largely began in the late 1970’s and 1980’s, which outsourced jobs internationally and left millions of domestic workers disgruntled. The same is true for automation, which has eliminated a significant number of jobs and not been adequately responded to by the US government. In combination with the culture shock many Americans faced as the US became more diverse and secular, these forces have left democracy under siege

in the US (Feder). In the present day, the US faces tremendous backlash for not only its criminal legal system, which disproportionately criminalizes communities of color, but also for its constraints on civil rights and liberties. Additionally, during the transfer of power between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, the legitimacy of the country's 'democratic' electoral process was called into question, especially by the Republican Party. Within just hours of the historic election in Georgia where two democratic senators were elected, there was a mob, including white supremacists, attacking the US Capitol building. This ongoing situation within the US, like India, also demonstrates how democracy has become a gradually diminishing form of governance.

### **Bodies of Evidence:**

#### *A Trip to the Past:*

Though the origins of the US- India relationship dates back several decades, a markedly important moment in defining the nature of this partnership is President Dwight E. Eisenhower's administration, particularly his second term. Given the precarious situation brewing between the US and the Soviet Union, other countries, especially developing countries such as India, were cast aside. However, it was during Eisenhower's second term as president that it appears the necessity of forging stronger relations between the US and India was truly recognized by the US. In December 1959, President Eisenhower became the first US president to set foot in the new, independent state of India. Leading up to this visit, however, relations with the US and India, particularly surrounding regime type, were tumultuous. India had traditionally shared a close relationship with the Soviet Union but in response to a series of US actions and the deep skepticism that India had of John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower's Secretary of State, India was drawn even closer into the Soviet orbit during the early 1950's (Donahue, 10). Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India even conducted a highly publicized visit to the Soviet Union and

began praising the tremendous growth of the region since the death of former leader Joseph Stalin (Donahue, 15). However, in the mid-1950's both the US and India began to realize the importance of a better relationship with one another, grounded in the principles of democracy (Donahue, 18-19). And Eisenhower's visit to India in 1959 solidified this understanding between both countries. In front of thousands of Indian citizens at the Civic Reception for World Agriculture Fair on December 13, 1959, Eisenhower states that a stronger relationship between the US and India would be foundational for other countries determining their own governing systems around the world. President Eisenhower acknowledges the vast differences that exist between both countries but remarks that they are "close neighbors" in their "fundamental ideas and convictions about democracy... [and] ought to be closer" (Eisenhower). Eisenhower concludes with the idea that India and the US as countries "who are free- and who prize [their] freedom above all other gifts of God and nature- must know each other better; trust each other more; support each other more" (Eisenhower).

Though drawing a correlation between solely the words of one American president and the implementation of a democratic system of governance within India is unreasonable, it is apparent that Eisenhower's visit to India influenced India's vigor in becoming a full-fledged democracy. For example, a key aspect of democracy is to allow for free and fair elections to occur in one's country. However, prior to the late 1950's and early 1960's, political power in India was concentrated in the hands of one political party- the Congress Party. But by the early 1960's, a year after Eisenhower's visit, the growth of democracy in India had allowed for various party movements to arise, including the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party and several ethnic movements in the provinces of Jammu, Kashmir, and Punjab (Nayak, pg. 9-10). Eisenhower's visit to India was arguably the most important, however, for creating the narrative

that India could serve as a political counterweight to China's growing communist influence in the region (Rajagopalan, pg. 1-2). This narrative, which largely continues to frame the US-India relationship today, meant that through adopting and spreading democracy, India could offset the authoritarian and imperialist motives of China within the region. This was key to US interests during the Cold War period as it was locked in an ideological feud with the Soviet Union to decide whether communism or capitalism would prevail. Eisenhower was insistent on providing aid to New Delhi throughout his term because if the US helped encourage India towards democracy and thus "win the development race versus China," it could indicate that development and democracy go hand in hand and are not mutually exclusive (Tenreiro). Thus, in attempting to strengthen relations with India, especially though their shared vein of democracy, not only were democratic values strengthened within India, but the possibility was endless for what democracy could look like around the world.

Eisenhower's visit to India was crucial to US foreign policy interests for two additional reasons. First, it shifted the depth and character of the relationship between the US and India. Especially because his visit came after India's newly acquired status as an independent state, this proved that the US- the global hegemon- recognized the legitimacy and worth of this country. This may have also contributed to strengthened relations between both countries while also demonstrating to India that promoting democracy, rather than communism was in their best interests. Lastly, Eisenhower's second term demonstrated the US' firm interest in prioritizing the creation and continuity of democracy within India specifically. Given that President Eisenhower's visit to New Delhi was amidst the Cold War, a tumultuous and tense era for US foreign policy, this visit represented to the US that spreading democracy, in addition to economic and national security interests, needed to be part of the US' foreign policy agenda. Though his

speech was given at an agricultural fair, Eisenhower's message was clear in that despite their differences, the relationship between these "sister-democracies," should be given more attention (Eisenhower).

### Initiatives & Influence

To continue analyzing the theme of democracy within the US-India relationship, it is instructive to time travel to July 2005, when the signing of several important deals between both countries revitalized conversations concerning the commitment both countries shared to democracy. On July 18, 2005, President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had finally reached an agreement regarding nuclear weapons, which "represent[ed] the most direct recognition to date of India's status as a nuclear weapons state and thus a reversal of more than three decades of U.S. nonproliferation policy" (Kronstadt, 1-2). The signing of the deal was so monumental that it made the headlines of several newspapers including the New York Times who published an article titled "*U.S. to Broaden India's Access to Nuclear-Power Technology.*" The remainder of the article detailed how historic the creation of this treaty was in the US-India relationship due to their rather punctuated relations since the end of the Cold War. Moreover, the article indicates that improving relations with India allowed for the South Asian giant to continue serving "as a counterweight to China," which, as discussed previously, was crucial to US interests (Weisman). The nuclear agreement between both countries was quickly followed by another bilateral agreement signed ten days later, on July 28, 2005, that outlined several security-related areas where both countries could expand cooperation (Kronstadt, pg. 10-12). In addition to promoting warmer relations between both countries, both agreements individually laid the groundwork for spurring conversations about several important topics, including democracy.



In conjunction with the nuclear agreement signed on July 18, 2005, both countries took to publicly releasing a joint statement on the emergence of their new partnership through the U.S.-India Global Democracy Initiative. This initiative details that due to both countries' shared interest in "strengthen[ing] [the] values, ideals and practices of freedom, pluralism, and rule of law," they will be assisting other countries who are in the middle of or are seeking to democratize (U.S.-India Global Democracy Initiative). Both countries included several ways in which they intend on achieving this goal: the creation of training courses in India, the US or another third world country to strengthen other societies' democratic foundations, designing a "virtual Coordination and Information Center" so that India and the US could stay in constant communication about the best democratic practices, and forming a partnership at the UN General Assembly Summit on Millennium Development Goals to ensure the promotion of the link between democracy and global development (U.S.-India Global Democracy Initiative). In a statement by David H. McCormick, Under Secretary of Commerce for Industry and Security on November 28, 2005, he once again emphasizes the importance of both countries concentrating on their similarities in being strong, independent democratic countries to ensure that principles of democracy are upheld. McCormick even states that the closer relationship and thus conversations the US and India have had with regards to democracy have been realized by several developing countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka- all of whom look to these countries as role models for the governance structures they hope to implement (McCormick).

Through this initiative, it is important to recognize that a vital conversation surrounding the preservation of democracy had been started by the two leaders of democracy within the global realm. This had three important implications for democratic values. The first is that because the talks and statements made by leaders of both countries were concerning their

commitment to democracy, an external accountability mechanism for practicing democracy had been created. Now, not only did the US and India have to be accountable to themselves in terms of upholding democratic principles, but they had to be accountable to one another as well as they were entering a partnership. The establishment of the “Coordination and Information Center” is evidence of this as it was designed to be a virtual database that allows for steady and constant communication surrounding the best practices of democracy (U.S.-India Global Democracy Initiative). Neither country could contribute to this resource without practicing some form of democracy within their own societies. Next, these public initiatives serve to increase external accountability to countries across the globe. By publicly coming out and stating their commitment to democracy both domestically and internationally, outsiders were now able to scrutinize both countries when they were not living up to the values they committed to. Moreover, when both countries were actively pledging to help transition other countries seeking to democratize, they created an enormous target on their backs because for them to teach other countries how to practice democracy, they must know how to practice it themselves. Both such accountability mechanisms discussed should, in theory, strengthen democratic relations because not only are the US and India drawing closer through this partnership, but they are also being forced to practice this form of governance in their own countries, by each other and the world.

Lastly, this public statement announcing both countries’ commitment to establishing resources for other developing nations seeking to democratize clearly strengthens democratic values because it is infusing such values in territories where they were previously foreign or exercised inappropriately. In turn, India and the US could have built a stable and reliable network of strong democracies, rather than just relying on one another for strategies to improve their governing styles.

*A Case of Dying Democracies:*

Fast forwarding to the present, the recent eruption of extreme nationalism and populism within both India and the US demonstrates the consequences of what an inconsistent, and in some cases nonexistent, conversation surrounding democracy looks like. The rise of controversial leaders, who openly propagate extreme ideals of nationalism and supremacy, have significantly changed the culture of democracy in both countries. In India, the rise of current Prime Minister Narendra Modi has ushered in a new, exclusive culture of Hindu nationalism and supremacy which continues to ostracize and criminalize ‘others’ from different religious backgrounds including Christians and Muslims. Due to the shared relations between Modi’s political party, the Bhartiya Janata Party, and the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist group, the staunch beliefs of nationalism and supremacy have begun taking effect on the population within the country at large. In February 2020, for example, members of the youth wing of the RSS took to assaulting a group of teachers and students who were standing on the road, screaming slogans such as “Shoot the traitors to the nation!” (Subramanian). Modi, like former US president Donald Trump, has also been utilizing Twitter to propagate such ideals of Hindu nationalism by circulating images of himself with “a halo indicating Hindu symbolism of gods who glow like *surya* (the sun god).” (Rao, 12). However, what seems the most problematic is that nationalism and supremacy simply cannot co-exist with democracy. Studies find that Hindu nationalism, which seeks to only offer certain rights, liberties and protections to Hindus and overhauls the traditional ‘multicultural’ democracy that has long existed within India, simply cannot coexist with democratic ideals (Bhatt, 19-21). Thus, the longer Modi and his Hindu nationalist ideologies pervade India society, the more democratic principles will weaken.

Similarly, within the United States, the rise of President Donald Trump brought white nationalism and supremacy to the forefront of American politics. The concept of white nationalism stems from the desire to create a “physical or spiritual white state” (Collins). And through his public statements, primarily on Twitter, as well as his staffing and policy decisions, it is evident that the culture Trump promoted during his administration was conducive to white supremacists who knew they would go unpunished. Key examples of white nationalism propagated by Trump include his immigration policy which sought to establish a concrete wall between the US and Mexico to prevent future immigration flows, which is a key facet of white nationalists who believe that immigrants are trying to steal their opportunities (Clark). Moreover, throughout his entire presidential campaign and administration, Trump has either vocally expressed ideologies consistent with white supremacy or refused to condemn actions of groups who spread this ideology (Gabbatt). Trump also allowed for the racial and gender divides to deepen through his lack of desire to promote police oversight to decrease the criminalization of communities of color and the constant berating of women in powerful societal roles. A prime example of this is can be seen throughout the entirety of Trump’s administration, during which Black unemployment rates had been at least 2% higher than that of the general unemployment (Collins). Like India, the culture that has been created within the US in terms of extreme nationalism and populism is not conducive to democratic values. Without a more frequent and consistent conversation surrounding democracy, such values could risk never being restored, in both countries.

### **Counterargument: Counterbalancing China**

A crucial piece of evidence used in formulating my argument is Eisenhower’s visit to India and the establishment of the idea that India could counterbalance China’s regional

influence. However, critics may argue that while this may have been true during the Cold War, China's significant level of growth in recent years makes India an ineffective counterweight in the region. Since the 1980's, China's economy has grown tremendously; now it stands at more than twice the size of India's. Additionally, despite India having the world's largest population, China's population is significantly healthier and more educated than India's. Lastly, China has the resources and infrastructure needed to support its population. For example, each year, China "adds more miles of highway per year than India does in total" (Perkovich, pg. 17). Thus, this counterargument does bear significant weight as it begs the question what the point of is having a democratic country in a region of the world when it is not only struggling to uphold this form of governance but is markedly weaker than the actors it is trying to counterbalance.

To counter this, I have three main arguments. First, it is important to recognize that regardless of size, India's geographical location makes it an ideal country to be a counterweight for China. Because the country is nestled closely next to the communist giant, having embodied democratic principles within its borders demonstrates to China that ideologies beyond communism do in fact exist and can produce societies that are intact. More importantly, it demonstrates to China that India can hold its own. Though the South Asian giant may have been desperate for help during the Cold War era shows China that not only does India not *need* it anymore, especially now with the backing of the US, but it also does not have to adopt communist ideologies because it has its own method of governance. Second, I would argue that for the US, having India be a democratic ally, rather than a communist ally is in our best interests. Not only does India share our same values, but it has an enormous young and growing population that it influences, earning it the title "regional superpower" (Cartwright, pg. 5).

Infusing these 1.3 billion individuals with the importance of democratic values, such as freedom of speech and religion, would allow for the importance of such freedoms and thus preserving democracy to be recognized. Lastly, India doesn't have to counterbalance the weight of China on its own. There are several other countries spread throughout the Asian Pacific region that are also democracies such as Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, etc. Thus, even if India doesn't counterbalance the weight of China alone, its commitment to democracy, especially as an influential actor in the region, combined with the political backing of these other actors allows it to be a megaphone parading the importance of democracy in front of communist giant China.

**Next Steps:**

Throughout this paper, it has been evidenced that not only are there severe signs of democratic ideals dwindling within the US and India but also that a conversation surrounding democracy has been occurring far less frequently than is necessary between both actors. Thus, to renew conversations regarding democracy in both countries and to ensure that both countries themselves are living up to these values, I propose the following policy prescriptions.

First, Modi must be forced to cut ties with the RSS and other associated Hindu supremacist parties. Currently, their organization stands at 5 million people (Frayer and Khan) and the reliance that the BJP places on the RSS continues to grow day by day. Most recently the BJP has come to be known as the "political brand-name of RSS" (Pakistan-India-US Relations, pg. 1-2). and influences over 80% of the Hindu population (Frayer and Khan) within India by means of the RSS using violence and coercive tactics against citizens to side with their ideology. However, as mentioned previously, in a world where Hindu nationalism exists, there is simply no room for democracy (Bhatt, 19-21). Thus, for Modi to encourage a return to a true democracy, he must be willing to abandon relations with those that seek to undermine its very

principles. Pressuring Modi to abandon these ties could come in the form of imposing trade barriers or trade sanctions, withholding monetary aid and/or nuclear supplies. Such actions have worked in the past, the most recent example being Trump stripping India of its preferential trading status in response to India increasing restrictions on its markets in 2019. Such harsh actions by the US begun squeezing the Indian economy so much that it was forced to adjust the accessibility of its markets (Held)

Second, the development of the Coordination and Information Center must be prioritized. Mentioned previously, this is an invaluable resource driven solely by the US and India and serves as a conduit to communicate about effective democratic practices and principles. This will also serve to hold one another accountable. For example, considering the current situation where protests have erupted in both countries along with the rise of nationalism, both countries can communicate on best practices to contain and respond to the protesters that is consistent with democratic principles. The current link to this resource, as listed on the State Department website, is inaccurate, which could only symbolize that either the resource itself is not being invested in currently or it has been converted onto a private platform. In any case, whether the information is public or not, the US and India need to reconsider creating and engaging in this center a priority.

Third, President Biden should make visiting India, and primarily meeting with the farmer protestors, a top priority in his foreign policy agenda. This would allow the protestors, who are exercising their liberties and rights under a democratic system to protest, to regain the sense of legitimacy that has been stripped away from them due to their continuous suppression by Modi. Additionally, acknowledging the protestors and their concerns could better inform the US on how to guide India to make policy that is more representative of individuals from all

backgrounds, including farmers. To be a true democracy, policies made by the government need to be reflective of the interests of various individuals and enlightening India on how and why this needs to be a priority could be the key to restoring democracy in this corner of the world.

Lastly, the root causes of protests at home must be addressed. The recent eruptions of police brutality are not new, but they have certainly become more illuminated due to the influence of social media. Thus, as India is encouraged to become more democratic, America must be willing to acknowledge that democracy is in fact waning within its own borders and take active steps to combat this. Because systemic racism has become ingrained in US' laws and institutions, this will take time to unravel. However, steps that President Biden could take to promote a culture that is inclusive of individuals from all backgrounds is to scrutinize our legal systems, especially incarceration rates of BIPOC community members and the ways in which law enforcement disproportionately targets this community. Biden could also support legislation that has begun circulating throughout the nation that promotes anti-racism education within schools, especially within privileged settings such as college institutions. Though this seeps back into domestic politics rather than foreign policy, it is essential to understand that as leaders of democracy in the modern world, practicing democracy effectively within our own borders is quintessential to assisting other countries seeking to democratize.

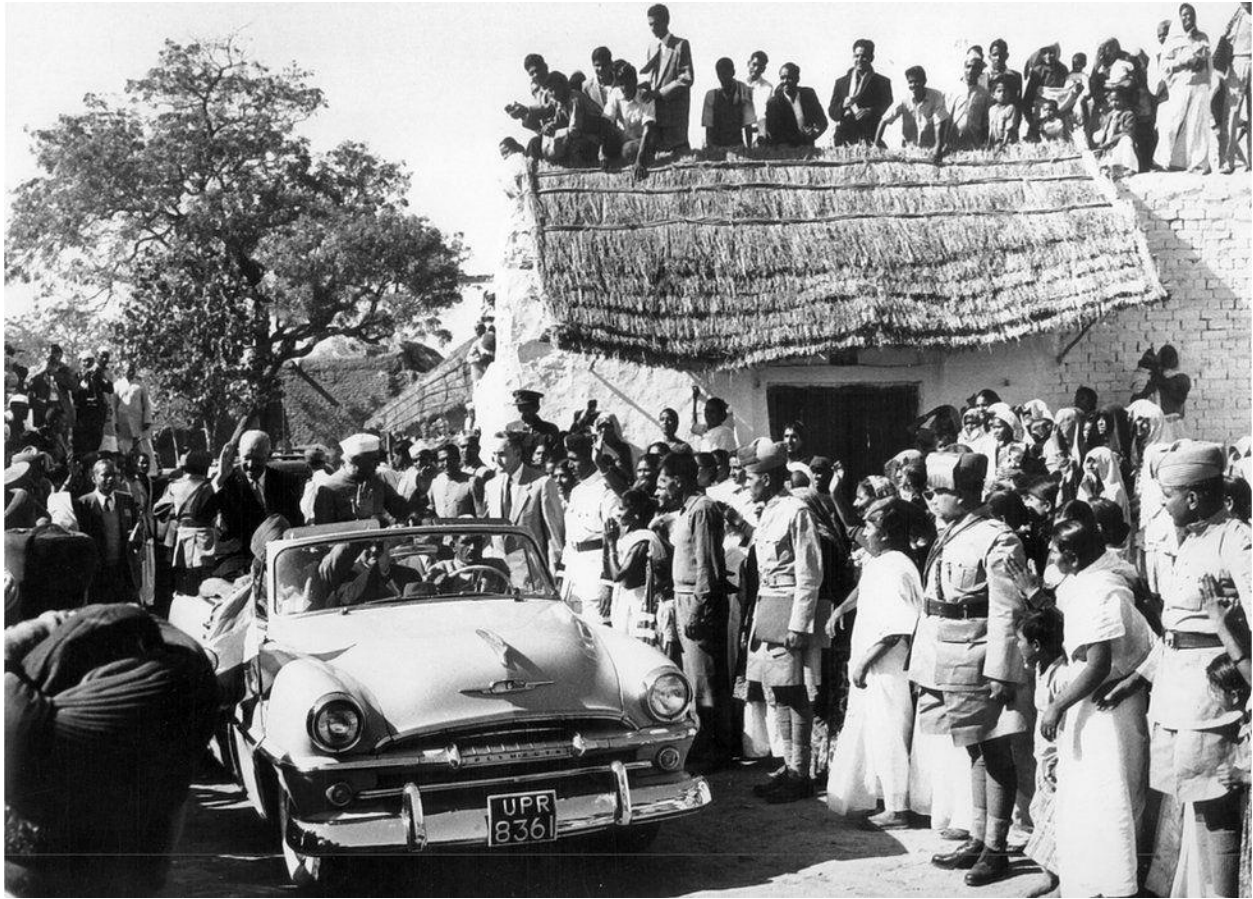
**Concluding Remarks:**

The protests within both the United States and India highlight similarities in the conundrum that both countries have found themselves in; both champion the principles of democracy but struggle to commit to them in action. However, given the size of both countries' populations as well as their combined influence on the international stage, these protests could pose a threat to democratic principles globally. Thus, as a softer realist seeking to engage in more



strategic and diplomatic relations abroad to protect our national interests, I believe that India and the US must draw closer to strengthen democratic values in each other. Through Eisenhower's conversations with some of India's earliest leaders and previous joint initiatives both countries have entered regarding democracy, it is evident that both countries recognize the importance of preserving democratic ideals in each other's society. However, the most recent protests in both countries have exemplified that without a deeper, more consistent conversation between both countries surrounding democracy, consequences will arise that undermine the legitimacy and reputation of both societies. To ensure that democracy continues to be a system of governance for generations to come, it is important that as the President of the United States, Biden begins placing an emphasis on how to govern democratically in his foreign policy agenda, especially in his conversations with India. Though the growth of China certainly remains a pressing issue, encouraging the preservation of democratic values in India allows the US to have a reliable and relatable partner in the region. Future research in this realm could analyze how to accurately measure the strength of both countries' relationships and how the strengthening of democracy in both nations affects the number of protests within their borders.

**The Birth of a New Friendship:**  
**Former US President Dwight E. Eisenhower greeted by overwhelming crowds in India in 1959 as he becomes first president to set foot in the newly independent country.**



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