

The United States and the Democracy Question in South Asia

S. D. Muni

Professor Emeritus, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Former Ambassador and Special Envoy, Government of India.

Ideologically, the United States is a self-proclaimed promoter and protector of democracy in the world. Its democracy policy has gradually evolved over the past century. The US fought the Second World War to defend democracy against fascism and, waged a three-decades-long struggle during the Cold War against communism. Soon after the Cold War, U.S. President George Bush Senior proposed a 'New World Order' based on "freedom, peace and democracy." His successor, President Bill Clinton, said at the United Nations on September 27, 1993, that the 'overriding purpose' of American foreign policy is to "expand and strengthen the world's community of market based democracies." In order to advance this purpose, Clinton's Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, took the initiative of establishing a Community of Democracies (CoD). At the first meeting of the CoD in Warsaw in 2000, 106 countries promised to advance democratic norms and institutions.¹ The U.N. endorsed this intergovernmental organization and later raised a "U.N. Fund for Democracy," with contributions from members.

In recent years, President Joe Biden has convened the 'Summit of Democracy.' The first such summit was convened in a virtual form in Washington on December 9-10, 2021. Its objectives were of "defending against authoritarianism, addressing and fighting corruption and advancing respect for human rights." The second summit was hosted by the U.S. in collaboration with Costa Rica, Zambia, Netherlands and South Korea in March 2023, and the third summit was hosted by South Korea in March 2024, in a hybrid, in person and virtual, form. The second summit was prompted by the feeling that there was "autocratic assertion and an ongoing democratic recession." The U.S. strategic community (official and unofficial) has identified Russia and China as the two powerful states pursuing "autocratic" assertion, thus integrating its ideological stance on democracy with the foreign policy goals of containing Russia and China. Biden promised at the second summit that he would work with the U.S. Congress to "commit \$9.5bn across all over efforts to advance democracy around the world." In a critical assessment of Biden's approach, the Carnegie Endowment for Peace said that "Biden's democracy policy...actions belie the administration's soaring

¹ For the text of the declaration see "Warsaw Declaration: A roadmap to democracy". June 27, 2000. <https://community-democracies.org/app/uploads/2019/04/WD-brochure-large.pdf>.

rhetorics about standing for democracy against autocracy.”² The declared policy’s inconsistencies and its contradictions with the actions, however, are not limited to the Biden-Harris administration alone, but to the U.S. approach as a whole. Recall President Clinton’s campaign speeches in 1992, when he had criticized his predecessor Bush Senior for aligning American interests with a variety of dictatorial regimes, while highlighting the values of democracy and freedom.

Democracy in South Asia

Let us look closely at these inconsistencies in U.S. democracy policy in South Asia over the years. South Asia as a region occupies a strategically important place in U.S. foreign policy as it accounts for a third of the world’s population, closely neighbors China and turbulent West Asia, is a potentially attractive economic market, and its countries are jostling with diverse and fluid forms of democratic governance.

On the ideological plane, the U.S. State Department brings out two reports every year to monitor human rights and religious freedoms all over the world. These reports cover in detail various aspects that underline democratic processes and governance, like violations of human rights and personal freedoms, political freedoms, the role of the judiciary, media censorship and prosecutions of journalists, government corruption, discriminatory nationalism, the status of ethnic and religious minorities, gender justice, etc. These reports serve an important role in U.S. domestic politics to show how committed the government of the day is to the cause of democracy. In these reports, policy recommendations are also made to the government in its approach to specific countries, depending on their positive or negative record on various aspects. Measures like sanctions, denial of economic assistance and visas, and trade and other restrictions on those who violate norms, including individuals, leaders, business houses, managers of democratic institutions, and the like, are implemented to get the faults corrected.

In these reports, South Asian countries have been found wanting on many of the human rights and religious freedom parameters, of democratic functioning. For instance, the Report of the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedoms (USCIRF) for 2024-25, listed four South Asian countries, namely India, Pakistan, Myanmar and Afghanistan as “countries of concern.” Sri Lanka was put on the list of countries under “special watch” while Pakistan was pulled up for its discriminatory and harsh blasphemy laws. India was described as a country where “religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate,” which “reinforced discriminatory nationalist policies” and also failed to “address communal violence...against Muslims and their places of religious worship.” This report was endorsed by the U.S. Ambassador in India. Earlier President Obama had sounded caution to the India in a

² Thomas Carothers and Francis Brown, “Democracy Policy under Biden”, Carnegie Endowment for Peace, Washington DC, February 06, 2024.

public speech in New Delhi during his state visit in 2015. In Sri Lanka too, according to the latest report, "religious freedom continued to decline," the report said, pointing out that lands belonging to Hindu and Muslim minorities were being acquired for construction of Buddhist places of worship.

Similarly, detailed country reports on the state of human rights, annually prepared by the U.S. Department of State since 1977, also show South Asian countries in poor light. Most of them have been censured for restraining freedom of expression, violence and discrimination against minorities, life-threatening conditions in prisons, gender violence and injustice, persecution of political opponents, and related issues.

Besides Department of State monitoring, there are think tanks and advocacy institutions engaged in regular studies and analysis of the democracy situation in the world. In its latest "Freedom in the World" report, Freedom House categorizes all the South Asian countries as "partially free," and India's Kashmir as "not free." On India, it says that "separate incidents of violence resulted in damage to mosques, Muslim-owned businesses and Christian churches." South Asian countries have rejected such categorization. South Asian governments have dismissed the U.S. reports as biased and distortions of reality. Reacting to the 2024-25 USCIRF report, India's Minister for External Affairs S. Jaishankar described it as uncalled for "interference." He said:

"It cannot be that one democracy has a right to comment on another, and that's part of promoting democracy globally. But when others do that, it becomes foreign interference. Foreign interference is foreign interference, irrespective of who does it and where it is done."

Describing the USCIRF as a "biased organisation with a political agenda," Randhir Jaiswal, spokesperson of India's Ministry of External Affairs said, "We reject this malicious report, which only serves to discredit USCIRF further."³ Similarly, the Pakistani Foreign Office spokesperson Mumtaz Zahara Baloch reacting to the 2023 report on religious freedom said: "Such ill-informed reporting exercises about internal affairs of sovereign states are pointless, irresponsible and counterproductive."⁴ India has not been issuing visas to USCIRF representatives for over a decade.

Cold War Policy Inconsistencies and Contradictions

U.S. agencies make various policy recommendations for the government, which include sanctions (including financial), visa restrictions and other diplomatic measures, to be imposed on countries and entities violating the rights of their citizens. The U.S. government has only selectively accepted such recommendations depending upon its perceived strategic, economic and other interests.

³ *The Hindustan Times* (Delhi), October 04, 2024.

⁴ *The Dawn* (Karachi), May 19, 2023. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1754289>.

This is evident in U.S. policies towards South Asian countries. During the Second World War, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt wrote to Gandhi, the leader of India's freedom struggle, to cooperate with the British war efforts saying: "Our common interest in democracy and righteousness will enable your countrymen and mine to make common cause against a common enemy." Gandhi and India's freedom fighters refused the request and asked for the grant of Indian independence first. After independence, India denounced military alliances and emerged as a leader of the non-aligned movement. India's non-alignment and its cordial relations with the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the People's Republic of China – the perceived bastions of Communism and adversaries of the U.S. – so annoyed policy-makers in Washington that they decided to contain India within South Asia. For instance, during the Cold War, the U.S. preferred military regimes of Pakistan against a democratic India. The reason was that India refused to follow the U.S. vision of the world and Pakistan was more than willing to do the U.S. bidding in return for American military, economic and diplomatic support against India.

India's push for democratization of the Himalayan Kingdoms of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim was only selectively welcomed by the U.S. In Nepal, the U.S.' preferred option remained Monarchy since the rise of King Mahendra in 1955, until the elimination of Monarchy under King Gyanendra in 2008. The democratization of Sikkim (1975) and Bhutan (2008) were accepted in Washington. India's support for the emergence of an independent and sovereign Bangladesh in 1971 was militarily resisted by the U.S. Subsequently, the U.S. was seen in New Delhi as being actively involved in the Pakistan and China-engineered military coup in Bangladesh in 1975 that overthrew a democratic regime, brutally killing its popular Prime Minister Mujibur Rahman and his entire family. During the 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. even allied with China to isolate the USSR and force it to retreat from Afghanistan. This proved the consistent Indian assumption that the Cold War was being waged not to fight Communism ideologically but to contain the USSR to consolidate U.S. power and supremacy in the world. The broader strategic irritation and indifference towards India in U.S. policies was punctuated by periodic and limited economic and military support (after the Chinese aggression in 1962). There were also U.S. Presidents like Eisenhower, Kennedy and Reagan who appreciated India's democratic credentials and wanted to improve bilateral relations but strategic interests worked out by the Departments of State and Defense did not let the White House's ideological preferences translate into concrete policies. The real shift in U.S. approach towards India has been evident only in the context of India's declared nuclear weapons power status in 1998, its growing economy since the early 1990s, and the rising challenge posed by China to U.S. supremacy and India's territorial integrity in the Indo-Pacific region. The U.S. sees India as a credible force in the Indian Ocean to balance Chinese expansion and assertion, and India looks towards the U.S. for military, technological, economic and diplomatic support to match China's phenomenal rise. In pursuance of this strategic convergence, the U.S. is soft-peddling its response to India's democratic deviation,

and India is willing to absorb minor ideological shocks from the U.S.⁵ To accommodate India's unhappiness, the U.S. Department of State has distanced itself from the latest USCIRF report.

U.S. support for Pakistan started with the firming up of the Cold War against the Communist powers Russia and China. Explaining this support, a senior State Department official observed in 1951:

"We do however have a great incentive to help Pakistan for the reason that Pakistan is very co-operative with us and the western countries. Pakistan has a very forthright attitude with respect to the basic cold war issues. Pakistan...has in other ways demonstrated her willingness to participate with us."⁶

Several studies hold U.S. support for Pakistan responsible for the erosion of its democracy and the rise of its military as a domestic power center. The sudden death of its founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah followed by the mysterious assassination of its popular Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan broke the back of democratic evolution in Pakistan. The U.S. Central Investigation Agency is suspected of having played a role in Liaquat Ali's assassination.⁷

In his biography, *"Friends, Not Masters"* (Oxford University Press, 1967), Pakistan's first military dictator General Ayub wrote that American support for his army gave it strength and confidence between 1952 and 1958. This encouraged the army to take control of the Pakistani State in 1958. By then Pakistan had become a military ally of the U.S. Pakistan's military has consistently received U.S. military, political and economic support (estimated to be \$67 bn between 1951 and 2011). After the Cold War, the U.S. needed Pakistan to fight its post-9/11 war on terrorism in Afghanistan. Even after realizing that Pakistan was a part of the ISIS and Al-Qaida terror networks, and its strategic proximity was growing with China, the U.S. continued to support Pakistan and its military's dominance in its polity. The latest example of support for the Pakistani military was evident in the ouster of popular Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan through a parliamentary conspiracy in April 2022.⁸ Pakistan's nuclear weapons power status, its identity as the largest Islamic State, its proximity to the turbulent Islamic world, and its location on the Persian Gulf and in the neighborhood of China cannot be ignored by Washington's strategists.

Recent Democratic Upheavals in South Asia

⁵ For an interesting over view of values and strategic conflict between India and the US, see Daniel Markey, "India As It Is: Washington and New Delhi Share Interests, Not Values", *Foreign Affairs* July/August 2023, Vol. 102, No. 4. Pp. 128-141.

⁶ As cited in Baldev Raj Nayar, *American Geopolitics and India*, Manohar Publication, new Delhi, 1976.

⁷ M.S. Venkataramani, *The American Role in Pakistan*, New Delhi 1982. Also see, Akhtar Baloch, "The Mystery that shrouds Liaquat Ali Khan's murder", *The Dawn* (Karachi), October 16, 2015.

⁸ "Imran Khan Claimed He was threatened by the US" *The Guardian* (London), March 31, 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/31/imran-khan-address-pakistan-faces-no-confidence-vote>.

Three South Asian countries have undergone democratic upheavals in the past two decades. Nepal saw democratic mainstreaming of a decade-old Maoist insurrection in 2006 and the elimination of its Monarchy in 2008, for an “inclusive, federal, republican democratic” order. The Maoist leadership had promised to create a “New Nepal” through systemic transformation. During March-July 2022, a popular uprising in Sri Lanka, called *Janatha Aragalya* (people’s struggle) forced its democratically elected President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country. The Rajapaksa clan was known to be authoritarian, corrupt and strategically leaning towards China. In the presidential elections in September 2024, Anura Kumara Dissanayake of a radical, leftist outfit, the *Janatha Vimukti Peramuna* (JVP) known for its violent rebellions in 1971 and 1989, has emerged victorious. Dissanayake has promised to bring about systemic changes in the Sri Lankan polity. In Bangladesh, a massive student uprising defied violent suppression and forced Sheikh Hasina, its prime minister of 15 years, to resign and flee the country. An interim political setup that includes student leaders and led by Noble Laureate and activist Mohammad Yunus has assumed power. The new administration promises to radically reform Bangladesh’s political dynamics.

The U.S. reacted differently to these transformations. In Nepal, it strongly opposed the Maoist insurrection and while pleading for a peaceful resolution of the turmoil, and condemning human rights violations both by the Maoists and the ruling monarchy, offered military and financial assistance to the latter to crush the former. The U.S. support, along with support from China, had emboldened the autocratic Monarchy to avoid reaching a peaceful compromise with mainstream democratic parties and the Maoists. These two anti-monarchy forces joined hands and, blessed by India, eventually forced the King to surrender his executive power in April 2006. Mainstreamed into politics, the Maoists with support from other Nepali democratic parties eliminated Monarchy through a popularly elected Constituent Assembly in 2008. The U.S. accepted this change and has since been pursuing cordial relations with Nepal, including under Maoist-led governments. Indeed, Biden invited Pushpa Kamal Dahal, the former Maoist guerrilla leader who was the then Nepali prime minister, to attend the second Democracy Summit in 2023.

In Sri Lanka, when an inefficient and autocratic presidency of Gotabaya Rajapaksa triggered a huge popular uprising, the U.S. stood by the people. The Department of State opposed Gotabaya’s imposition of emergency and the violent police action to deal with the uprising in 2022. It extended support for the protesters. The U.S. Ambassador in Colombo Julie Chung was in direct contact with the protest leaders and had reportedly financially backed them. In a post on X, formerly Twitter, on May 04, 2022, she said: “The freedom to engage in peaceful protest without fear of arrest is fundamental to democracy. The US urges restraint on all sides and reiterates our support for the rights of peaceful protest.” Whispers in Colombo’s political circles pointed to the U.S. embassy’s efforts, while supporting the protests, in helping

President Gotabaya (a dual U.S./Sri Lanka citizen) escape without being personally harmed. A U.S.-friendly successor to him in Ranil Wickremasinghe was ensured. There were also reports of Ambassador Chung subsequently visiting the JVP office, supporting JVP leader Dissanayake's bid for the presidency in the September 2024 elections and sponsoring his U.S. visit to mobilize diaspora support before the election.⁹ This underlined, in view of the Nepali example, that the U.S. is willing to engage and support radical forces in South Asia that had engaged in armed rebellion, when such forces join democratic politics.

In the case of Bangladesh, the U.S. has been consistently unhappy with the Awami League (AL) since the elections of 2009, as its sympathies lay generally with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) established by post-1975 military dictator Gen. Zia-Ur-Rahman and led after his death by his wife Begum Khalida Zia. The U.S. found it difficult to accept the legitimacy of the Hasina-led AL's electoral victory as elections were not conducted under an 'independent' interim administration, a provision made under the BNP government but amended by the AL government in 2011. Since 2021, the U.S. was openly pressuring Prime Minister Hasina to ensure "free and fair elections", under an interim arrangement. In December 2021, it imposed sanctions on Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a para-military force meant for counter-terrorism, anti-drug action and emergency use. This force was allegedly being politically abused for carrying out extra-judicial killings, abductions and election fund-raising through extortions. The U.S. Department of State imposed visa restrictions in May 2023, reiterating them in September 2023, ahead of the January 2024 elections, on "Bangladeshi individuals responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic election process... The United States is committed to supporting free and fair elections in Bangladesh that are carried out in a peaceful manner."

The U.S. viewed the January 2024 elections as unfair and rigged. After the elections, it lent support to the anti-government students' uprising (June-August), condemning the Hasina government for atrocities against the protesters, who were demanding her resignation and 'restoration of democracy.' Hasina's contention was that by using the shield of the students' movement, the U.S. worked to overthrow her regime because she had refused to toe the U.S. strategy for the Indo-Pacific region. Apparently, Bangladesh had refused to sign two U.S.-proposed defense agreements—the "General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA)" and the "Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). She publicly accused the U.S. of forcing her to let the U.S. build a military base on Saint Martine's Island.¹⁰ Yunus, who heads the post-Hasina interim government, has been a known friend and supporter of the U.S. since the Clinton presidency. There are media reports that the

⁹ Sena Thoradeniya, "Anura Kumara Disanayake's (AKD's) Tryst In America And Julie Chung's Apologists", Lankaweb, November 1st, 2023. <https://www.lankaweb.com/news/items/2023/11/01/anura-kumaras-akds-tryst-in-america-and-julie-chungs-apologists/>.

¹⁰ *The Times of India* (New Delhi), August 11, 2024.

U.S. has been quietly mobilizing and training students for the anti-government uprising. These reports quote Yunus introducing the protesting students' leader to former President Clinton, lauding these leaders' careful planning and execution of the Hasina government's ouster. The groundwork for this operation, spread over months, through funding the movement and training the leaders, was reportedly done by the International Republican Institute (IRI), a subsidiary of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and under information to the Department of State.¹¹

India has generally been uncomfortable with any major external, including from the U.S., move or intervention in its immediate neighborhood. However, the years of recent democratic upheavals in South Asia have also been the years of growing strategic proximity between India and the U.S. Both have a common objective of containing China's assertive and expansionist stance in the Indo-Pacific region, though their pursuance of this objective has mutual nuances and deviations. India was unhappy with the U.S. in its support of the Nepali Monarchy's military approach to the Maoists while repressing democratic institutions and parties. After the mainstreaming of the Maoists, the U.S. has accepted the primacy of India's strategic interests in the Himalayan state and the two countries are coordinating their approaches to Nepal. In the case of Sri Lanka, both India and the U.S. converged on supporting popular resentment against the Rajapaksa ruling clan that has been unduly leaning towards China. Both also found Wickremasinghe to be eminently acceptable as a successor of Gotabaya, and are generally working in harmony to ensure that newly elected President Dissanayake builds an inclusive and stable democratic order.

India has felt seriously disturbed by the U.S. support for regime change in Bangladesh. India had built a strong economic and security relationship with the Hasina regime, based on respect for mutual sensitivities and core interests. The forces opposed to Hasina like the BNP and radical Islamists of the Jamaat-e-Islami are traditionally close to Pakistan and inimical to India's interests. The rise of these forces and the prevailing instability, including attacks on the Hindu minority, and the fragility of the Yunus-led arrangement, are a matter of deep concern to India. Through quiet diplomatic channels, India has brought U.S. attention to it. It may be hoped that in the larger regional interest of both partners, the U.S. would be responsive to India to see that these forces do not gain ground in the evolving political dynamics of Bangladesh. In this respect, India's loss will only be the gain for Pakistan and China. In a recent interview, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell admitted that the U.S. role in Bangladesh has "raised some anxieties in India...but we have sought very much to communicate directly of our strong desire that India's interests are noted and acted on."¹² If the discordance between the

¹¹ Kit Kilareberg and Wyatt Reed, "Leaked file expose covert US government plot to destabilize Bangladesh's politics". *The GRAYZONE*, September 30, 2024. <https://thegrayzone.com/2024/09/30/us-plot-destabilize-bangladesh/>.

¹² *The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), October 06, 2024.

American and Indian approaches to Bangladesh is not bridged, the interests of both will suffer and Bangladesh will not be able to stabilize itself.
