

Diplomatic inertia

Is America giving Narendra Modi an easy ride?

The West is struggling to balance interests and values in India

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BARRING A HUGE political upset, Narendra Modi looks likely to begin a third term as India's prime minister soon after June 4th, when results of the general election will be announced. But the poll has not been pretty: on March 21st [Arvind Kejriwal](#), an opposition leader who is Delhi's chief minister, was arrested on corruption charges that he calls a political sham. Mr Modi, seemingly unnerved by low turnout, has ramped up [inflammatory rhetoric](#) against India's Muslim minority. Although voting itself has been generally unproblematic, most Western officials agree that Mr Modi has tilted the political pitch by suppressing dissent and weakening democratic

institutions. How should they deal with Mr Modi, particularly if his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) wins a large mandate?

The response to Mr Kejriwal's arrest hints at the diplomatic balancing act for Western governments. Unusually, a spokesman for Germany's foreign ministry reacted first. He said that independent judicial standards and "basic democratic principles" should be upheld. America's State Department followed, encouraging "a fair, transparent, and timely legal process". Indian authorities summoned the deputy heads of the American and German embassies for a scolding. No other country issued a public statement.

Indeed, Western officials are mostly allergic to calling Mr Modi out. Ask why, and many will first mention China. America and its closest allies are focused on cultivating India as a partner in counterbalancing China, especially since a clash in 2020 on the disputed border between the two countries hardened Indian views towards its neighbour. Next, Western officials often cite pressure from their governments and corporations for better access to the world's fastest-growing major economy. A third refrain is that India denounces Western criticism as imperialist hypocrisy—and penalises offenders.

Besides, India's democracy has always been flawed yet resilient. It went through worse when Indira Gandhi, a prime minister from the rival Congress party, suspended civil liberties in the 1970s. Its democratic institutions still have some life: the Supreme Court granted Mr Kejriwal interim bail on May 10th, although he must return to prison on June 2nd.

Ask the same Western officials whether their current approach to India is working, and most sound edgy. A few claim progress on individual political cases they raise privately. But there is growing anxiety about India's trajectory. And some worry that by failing to incorporate political values better in their dealings, Western governments are making the same mistakes they did with China in the past.

Such doubts have intensified following the [alleged Indian assassination](#) of a Sikh separatist in Canada last year, the attempted killing of [another in America](#) and revelations about Indian spying in Australia (India has denied involvement in the assassinations but declined to comment on the spying).

Those, combined with Mr Modi's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine or to help promote democracy in Myanmar and Bangladesh, are crystallising concerns among some officials that their big gamble on India may not pay off.

“We have to ask ourselves: if we succeed in strengthening India, will that come back to haunt us?” says one former Western official who worked on India policy. “India needs us far more than we think. And so we can afford to actually do the things that we're not doing today.” Alternative approaches include speaking out more consistently with allies on political issues and using Western investment as leverage.

A shift in the West's current approach is unlikely soon. That is [largely because of America](#). Under President Joe Biden, doubts about India are often voiced within the State Department. But India policy is dominated by the National Security Council, the Commerce Department and the Pentagon. One consequence is that the Biden administration has resisted a recommendation by a bipartisan federal commission on religious freedom to list India as a “country of particular concern”. If Donald Trump wins in November, he will probably be even more permissive.

Among “like-minded” democracies, there is little appetite for confrontation either. After Canada revealed the alleged assassination, its partners in the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing group (America, Britain, Australia and New Zealand) were slow to show solidarity. Britain and Australia are preoccupied with striking trade deals with India and co-operating on defence. The EU raises human-rights issues in a regular meeting with India but struggles to reach consensus among member states.

What could change this stance? A severe bout of communal violence might: though violence against Indian Muslims has rarely become a political issue in the West, it did so after deadly riots in 2002 in the state of Gujarat, when Mr Modi was chief minister there. And Western governments and corporations are facing increasing public scrutiny of their stance on rights abuses against Muslims in the wake of Israel's war in Gaza and China's mass internment of Islamic minorities.

The West may shift its policy if Mr Modi's muscle-flexing reaches deeper into the diaspora. Relations with Canada have already been upended by the alleged assassination. America has called for an investigation and protested in private. Some Western officials believe that India will henceforth use more restraint (or at least better tradecraft). But another incident would trigger a much deeper diplomatic crisis.

Demography in the fast-growing Indian diaspora matters, too. Many Western politicians assume widespread support for Mr Modi among people of Indian origin. But the proportion of the diaspora from Sikh, Christian or other minorities (who generally support the BJP less) is higher than within India. Christians, for example, account for 2% of India's population but 15% of Indian Americans.

That has already affected India's standoff with Canada, whose large Sikh population is deeply involved in Canadian politics. Britain's Conservative Party, meanwhile, enjoys strong backing from British Hindus but looks set to lose an election in July to the Labour Party, which traditionally draws support from Muslims of South Asian origin. Diaspora demography has yet to filter into politics in Australia but will do increasingly in future, predicts Ian Hall of Griffith University in Queensland. That is true in America, too, as many newer immigrants there hail from southern India, where the BJP is less popular.

Ultimately, the strongest impetus for change may be economic. Western corporations invested in China, Russia and other autocracies for years with little regard for human rights. Recently, though, they have grown more sensitive to consumer boycotts and supply-chain risks. A new EU due-diligence law could force Western businesses to factor in human-rights conditions when considering India as an alternative manufacturing base to China, thinks Michael Posner, a lawyer and former American official. He says that Western governments can now argue that "we have these laws and that means we're going to be more involved in this space. We want Western companies to invest in India, so help us to help you." The big question is whether Mr Modi will oblige. ■