

## Biden Administration Embraces Realpolitik, Abandons Human Rights

Doug Bandow

June 29, 2023

As a candidate, Joe Biden posed as a human rights champion, declaring, “Human rights will be the center of our foreign policy.” As a president, Joe Biden embraces confirmed autocrats and faux democrats.

One such is India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who visited Washington last week. Although there was no karaoke sing-a-long at the White House, Modi received virtually every other available courtesy, including the trappings of a formal state visit. Only South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and French President Emmanuel Macron have enjoyed similar favor.

It was quite a change for Modi. When his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) first won a parliamentary majority in 2013, he could not travel to the U.S. He had been banned by the State Department, ineligible to receive a visa for his role in the death of some 1,200 Muslims while chief executive of Gujarat state. Since then, his government has used Hindu nationalism to tighten its hold on power, increasing persecution of Muslims and Christians.

Even more striking, given the Biden administration’s emphasis on democracy, is Modi’s unashamed turn toward political authoritarianism. Rather like Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Modi has preserved the form of democracy, with a nominally free vote, while crippling opposition to his rule.

Freedom House records that India dropped out of the “free” category in 2020 and has continued to decline. Today India is only “partly free,” with especially significant limits on civil liberties. According to Freedom House, Modi’s government

has presided over discriminatory policies and a rise in persecution affecting the Muslim population. The constitution guarantees civil liberties including freedom of expression and freedom of religion, but harassment of journalists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other government critics has increased significantly under Modi. The BJP has increasingly used government institutions to target political opponents. Muslims, scheduled castes (Dalits), and scheduled tribes (Adivasis) remain economically and socially marginalized.

Perhaps most dramatic was the criminal prosecution of chief opposition leader Rahul Gandhi and his subsequent expulsion from parliament’s lower house, the Lok Sabha, for criticizing Modi. Gandhi is appealing a two-year sentence for defamation. Leaders of other parties also have been

targeted and jailed on equally dubious charges. If there is one hallmark of genuine democracy, it is the right to criticize political leaders. That no longer obtains in India.

Nor are politicians alone in facing punishment for expressing their opinions. Amnesty International warned, “The Indian government’s criminalization of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly has placed dangerous constraints on civil society. Human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, political opponents, peaceful protesters, academics and students all face arbitrary arrests and detention, unjust prosecutions and other forms of harassment and intimidation.” Even U.S.-based organizations fear retaliation against their Indian operations if they criticize Modi.

Biden administration officials admit their hypocrisy, lecturing adversaries about human rights while celebrating leaders of countries considered more useful for American interests. Not that India is the first case. Washington continues to subsidize the el-Sisi government in Egypt, a noted human rights abuser rated “not free.” Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates are other dictatorial bottom-feeders feted by Washington. Turkey receives fewer accolades, but the administration still wants to purchase its favor with F-16 sales.

And, of course, there is Saudi Arabia. The latter is among the ten worst regimes on Freedom House’s scale. To the good, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has relaxed the kingdom’s once-totalitarian social controls. However, religious restrictions remain among the world’s tightest, and he has expanded political repression. His most notable crime was turning his country’s Istanbul consulate into an abattoir with the murder and dismemberment of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

After this gruesome crime, Biden promised to treat MbS, as the killer prince is known, as a “pariah.” However, last summer the president dropped any human rights pretense while fruitlessly begging Riyadh to increase oil production, leaving him humiliated before the world. Yet the administration is now offering to turn American military personnel into modern Janissaries tasked with protecting the Saudi royal family. Biden insists that Washington fight a dangerous proxy war against Russia over Ukraine because the latter is a democracy (at least partially). Yet, the administration is simultaneously prepared to sacrifice American lives to protect one of the most tyrannical regimes on earth.

The reason for Biden’s inglorious Modi suck-up—a technical diplomatic term—is geopolitics. The Cold War featured many Washington concessions to a plethora of tyrants, murderers, authoritarians, thieves, dictators, and other assorted oppressors, with the main requirement being opposition to communism and the Soviet Union. The latter’s collapse freed American foreign policy from the need to accommodate regimes so antithetical to U.S. principles and values. However, Washington continues to rent friends even when they are not essential.

India is a prime example. Modi has benefited from generous doses of flattery and bribery because China is widely feared. Washington hopes that India will join America’s side and fight Beijing. With Russia essentially forced into China’s arms, New Delhi is the obvious counterweight.

Alas, this expects far too much from the relationship. *Foreign Policy's* Howard W. French writes, “India has unleashed what are probably exaggerated hopes that the emergence of a powerful new giant on the world stage can alter a potentially terrifying unfolding dynamic of zero-sum contest between Washington and Beijing.” Modi has demonstrated his independence by participating in the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) grouping, buying Russian oil, and tempering any criticism of Moscow. The Indians are concerned about China, but will not go to war for American interests, including Taiwan’s status. Better relations and increased cooperation with Washington would be positive, not transformational. For that the president should not abase himself before Modi.

Human rights will always pose a challenge for American foreign policy. The desire to spread liberty is worthy. However, contra the assumption of many officials and activists alike, the U.S. has little ability to force recalcitrant governments to conform to American wishes. For an authoritarian government, repression is essential. While such a regime might free a person or adjust a policy in response to foreign criticism, no government will dismantle itself at Washington’s command.

Indeed, public demands often make foreign states more intransigent. After all, who in the U.S. would support making concessions while under fire from an adversary overseas? Private efforts, by individuals and organizations, to embarrass human rights abusers might be more effective, highlighting violations without posing a geopolitical threat to target regimes.

As a result, Washington often turns to coercion, with sanctions its “go to” response. Alas, they rarely achieve their purported ends. For instance, Cuba has been under an American embargo for more than six decades. Economic penalties are most likely to work when narrowly focused and generally supported. Moreover, the demand must be clear and limited—e.g., the release of American pastor Andrew Brunson by Turkey. Insisting that, for instance, China stop incarcerating Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang, will not succeed.

General sanctions also have the unfortunate side effect of hurting the wrong people. For example, the U.S. is impoverishing the Syrian people, preventing them from reconstructing their country after a decade of war, to force the Assad government to make political concessions. It is a cruel and stupid policy, with the regime, which withstood a brutal civil war, determined to remain in power.

Magnitsky Act sanctions, which target individuals, satisfy the determination to do something, but, alas, achieve nothing in terms of changing offensive policies. As yet individual penalties have not forced any government to change its practices.

Although such sanctions usually are harmless, there can be downsides. For instance, the U.S. targeted Chinese officials for their nation’s purchase of Russian weapons, including the current defense minister. He won’t engage Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin so long as Washington lists him. Despite the complaints of Biden administration officials, the U.S. almost certainly would behave in the same manner if circumstances were reversed.

The ultimate means to improve human rights are war and regime change, but the resulting horrors are too great. The Iraq War, which was supposed to liberate the population, turned the entire nation into a sectarian battlefield, on which hundreds of thousands of people died and millions were forced from their homes. In Afghanistan the U.S. became just another foreign invader, treating the countryside as a battlefield in support of distant, alien rule. The promise of democracy was drenched in blood.

The alternative to foolish intervention need not be Biden-style reluctant acquiescence mixed with craven submission. Instead, the U.S. should treat other nations normally, with prudent, low-key backing for human rights.

In India's case, Washington's objective of a de facto military alliance is unattainable. Lesser agreements, such as improving diplomatic access, visa approval, and economic cooperation, benefit both sides. However, those could have been achieved by lower-level negotiations, followed by a phone conversation. Modi certainly didn't rate a state dinner. By embracing him and ratifying his premiership, the president gave him an undeserved reelection boost.

Nor should Modi have escaped a private discussion of New Delhi's human rights record. At the very least, he should have been informed that further human rights reversals would make an invitation to another official democracy conclave impossible. Official economic aid could be cut or eliminated. That would be better than conditioning assistance, which almost certainly would create more resentment than benefit.

Washington's principal duty is to those it represents, the American people. Serving them will sometimes force tough trade-offs, in which U.S. officials prioritize this nation's security over other peoples' human rights.

However, that shouldn't mean anything goes. Washington should observe a foreign policy Hippocratic Oath—first, do no harm. America shouldn't actively encourage repression or underwrite authoritarian rule or legitimize dictatorship. The U.S. shouldn't treat foreign peoples as a cheap means to America's ends, in which American policymakers get to decide that any geopolitical objective is worth any human price. And Washington should hold its friends and, more important, its own policymakers accountable for human rights violations.

Modi has come and gone. What should U.S. human rights policy be? A good starting point comes from the Apostle Paul: "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people." America should be a voice for liberty. Even more so, *Americans* should be so. However, Washington finds it hard enough to keep this country safe. Americans shouldn't expect Uncle Sam to save the *Doug* world.

*Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.*