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Navigating the Democracy- Security Dilemma in U.S. Foreign Policy: Lessons from Egypt, India, and Turkey

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Contents

Summary	1
Introduction	3
Dilemma Drivers	6
Egypt	7
Turkey	11
India	15
A Policy Assessment Framework	19
About the Authors	25
Notes	27
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	29

Summary

As President Joe Biden and his team seek to put the defense of democracy and protection of human rights at the center of U.S. foreign policy, they confront the stubborn fact that the United States maintains cooperative security relations with a wide range of undemocratic or democratically backsliding governments. Powerful security interests, especially countering terrorist threats, maintaining stability in the Middle East, and managing competition with a rising China, underlie many of these partnerships. Such situations frequently give rise to a policy dilemma: confronting partner governments over their political shortcomings risks triggering hostility that would jeopardize the security benefits that such governments provide to Washington. Yet giving them a free pass on democracy and rights issues undercuts the credibility of U.S. appeals to values, bolstering the damaging perception that America only pushes for democracy against its adversaries or in strategically irrelevant countries.

Already in the first year of Biden's presidency, such tensions have emerged in relations with countries as diverse as Egypt, Hungary, India, the Philippines, Poland, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. While the Biden administration has publicly and privately raised democracy and rights issues with various security partners, its cautious approach toward some of them has started to attract criticism from those who feel that near-term security interests have been too strongly prioritized compared to democracy and human rights concerns.

This paper looks in depth at the democracy-security dilemma with a view to helping U.S. policymakers deal with it more systematically and effectively. Case studies of U.S. policy toward Egypt, India, and Turkey over the past twenty years highlight the complexity of the democracy-security dilemma. In Egypt, U.S. concerns with the country's authoritarian

politics have surfaced periodically over the years yet struggled to find a meaningful place in a relationship dominated by deeply rooted security cooperation, including extensive U.S. security assistance. In India, a strong U.S. push, warmly welcomed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, to further strengthen the U.S.-Indian security partnership has unfolded alongside a distinctly illiberal turn in Indian politics. By contrast, democratic decline in Turkey has coincided with—and contributed to—a major deterioration in Ankara's relations with Washington, including significant divergence on a range of foreign policy issues.

There are no magic solutions to the democracy-security dilemma. But careful assessments of the security and political issues at stake can help U.S. policymakers avoid ad hoc approaches and diminish the long-standing tendency to back down reflexively on democracy and rights when clashing interests arise. Such assessments should address five key questions:

- First, *what are the specific security interests that the partnership with the foreign government in question will help advance?* Often, different parts of the U.S. government operate from different conceptions of the security interests at stake and rely on long-standing assumptions that persist on bureaucratic autopilot. To mitigate this, policymakers must identify and agree on the interests at stake in a given partnership to ensure they are operating from a clear shared understanding, at least within the U.S. government.
- Second, *what is the relationship between the security interests that the United States hopes the partnership will serve and the problematic democratic situation of the partner?* No simple relationship can be assumed. U.S. security interests may benefit, suffer, or remain unaffected if the democratic situation of the country improves. Candidly assessing the relationship will give policymakers a sense of what, if any, tensions exist between democracy and security objectives.
- Third, *how might U.S. security interests be threatened if the United States pushes a particular security partner harder on democracy?* Answering this question goes to the heart of weighing potential democracy-security trade-offs and requires close analysis that avoids the reflexive answer that pushing on democracy will immediately trigger a reduction in security collaboration.
- Fourth, *how can the United States raise democracy and rights issues with a politically problematic security partner in a way that maximizes the potential to advance democratic progress?* Engagement on democracy and rights should emphasize the country's self-interest and target not just individual rights cases but structural elements of democratic decline, while also clearly articulating U.S. redlines.
- Fifth, *what is reasonable to expect to achieve by pushing harder on democracy?* Too often, policymakers set the bar unrealistically high and conclude action is not worthwhile. Instead, they need to take a broader yet also more nuanced view of the potential benefits of pushing on democracy and rights issues.

Introduction

As President Joe Biden and his team seek to put the defense of democracy and protection of human rights at the center of U.S. foreign policy, they confront the stubborn fact that the United States maintains cooperative security relations with a wide range of undemocratic or democratically backsliding governments. Such situations frequently give rise to a policy dilemma: confronting these governments over their political shortcomings risks triggering hostility that would jeopardize the security benefits that such governments provide to Washington. Yet giving them a free pass on democracy and rights issues undercuts the credibility of U.S. appeals to values, bolstering the damaging perception that America only pushes for democracy against its adversaries or in strategically irrelevant countries. And if, as the Biden administration claims, democracy is the best system at delivering for people, soft-pedaling democracy may undermine the effort to help countries build effective political systems that will make them better partners in the long run.

Tensions between democracy and security are hardly a new feature of U.S. foreign policy. During the Cold War, the American-led effort to “defend the Free World” was marred by frequent U.S. decisions to partner with anticommunist autocrats who ruthlessly suppressed democratic movements in their countries. And while the anticommunist imperative faded after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the range of enduring U.S. interests—from maintaining geopolitical stability to countering terrorism—impelled U.S. policymakers to maintain close ties with undemocratic partners in many places. From former president Bill Clinton’s support of the Suharto regime in Indonesia and George W. Bush’s partnership with

Pakistani autocrat Pervez Musharraf to Barack Obama’s ambivalence over supporting the Arab Spring movements against longtime autocratic allies, democracy-security tensions have surfaced regularly in recent decades.

These tensions receded somewhat during the administration of former president Donald Trump, but only because Trump downgraded the U.S. interest in supporting democracy internationally to such a low level. But with the Biden team upgrading democracy’s place in U.S. foreign policy, clashes between democracy and security interests are once again multiplying. In his recent overview of Biden’s foreign policy, Richard Haass summarized the broader strategic context of these choices: “U.S. presidents have always allowed professed commitments to human rights and democracy to be set aside when other interests or priorities have come to the fore. . . . But the broader shift in U.S. foreign policy today, with its stress on both great-power competition and short-term domestic priorities, has made those trade-offs more frequent and acute.”¹ Already in the first year of Biden’s presidency, such tensions have emerged in relations with countries as diverse as Egypt, Hungary, India, the Philippines, Poland, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. While the Biden administration has publicly and privately raised democracy and rights issues with various security partners, its cautious approach toward several security partners has started to attract criticism from some observers who feel that near-term security interests have been too strongly prioritized compared to democracy and human rights concerns.²

As in any dilemma, there is no magic solution or perfect balance between pursuing democracy and security interests. But if the Biden administration is to fulfill its pledge to significantly upgrade U.S. support for democracy and human rights globally, it will need to find ways to advance the agenda in cases where the democracy-security dilemma is present. To that end, this paper looks in depth at the democracy-security dilemma with a view to helping U.S. policymakers deal with it more systematically and effectively. The objective of the paper is not to facilitate any sort of policy uniformity across the many different country contexts where the dilemma presents itself—our analysis emphasizes the variety and complexity of the ways in which the dilemma appears and must be dealt with. We find, for example, that the relationship between democratic health and closeness of security ties is far from linear: in India, autocratization has coincided with closer security ties with the United States, while in Turkey, the polar opposite has been true. Rather, our aim is to provide an analytic framework that can help policymakers ask and answer the critical questions that need to be considered when addressing the dilemma. We also seek to highlight some of the mistaken assumptions that policymakers bring to such contexts.

We note here several limitations on the paper’s scope. First, this paper is not an exploration of whether the United States should seek to support democracy internationally; rather, it proceeds from the premise that the Biden administration sincerely wishes to make democracy support a key part of its foreign policy and focuses on the challenges of doing so

with certain types of security partners. Second, we do not delve into or take a position on the ongoing debates about the overall scope of U.S. security interests—we take the Biden administration’s relatively expansive view of those interests, as set out in the March 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, as a policy given.³ And finally, we do not explore the negative democratic impacts of certain forms of security collaboration. While U.S. support like military assistance or intelligence cooperation may contribute very directly to keeping undemocratic regimes in place, this paper does not deal with this problem directly; rather, our focus is on U.S. choices of whether, when, and how to push or assist politically problematic security partners to do better on democracy and rights.⁴

This paper proceeds in three parts. We begin with a brief overview of some of the major security interests that have been driving recent U.S. administrations to cultivate close ties with many undemocratic governments. We then present in-depth studies of three key cases where the democracy-security dilemma has risen to the fore: U.S. relations with Egypt, India, and Turkey. Finally, we conclude with a series of policy recommendations for how best to understand and manage the tension between democracy and security interests.

The cases under study here embody many of the variations and complexities inherent in the democracy-security dilemma. All three countries have long had significant security ties with Washington. The United States has for decades viewed peace between Egypt and Israel as crucial to regional security and provides over \$1 billion per year in security assistance to the Egyptian armed forces. Turkey is a longtime ally in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). India has become a key partner in the campaign to build a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” as a charter member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the new linchpin of the U.S. security posture in Asia. Yet all three have glaring democratic shortcomings. Since the military takeover led by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in 2013, Egypt’s political space has shrunk dramatically amid a brutal crackdown on opposition. Turkey’s democracy is badly ailing, with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan having greatly increased repression and limited political pluralism over the past decade. And Prime Minister Narendra Modi has moved India further along a troubling path of political illiberalism, spurring the Varieties of Democracy Institute in its 2021 rankings to demote India from an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy.⁵

To better understand how policy trade-offs have been made over time, the paper traces the relationship between U.S. democracy concerns and security interests vis-à-vis these countries across the administrations of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump and thus far under Joe Biden. From these three country studies we extract some broader lessons and propose a framework for analyzing contexts where democracy and security interests clash, with a view to helping policymakers find ways to maintain or develop at least some focus on democracy and rights even when significant security interests are at stake.

Dilemma Drivers

The Biden administration's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance asserts that maintaining American security “requires us to meet challenges not only from great powers and regional adversaries, but also from violent and criminal non-state actors and extremists, and from threats like climate change, infectious disease, cyberattacks, and disinformation that respect no national borders.”⁶ This threat assessment—the latest version of the expansive perspective that has long prevailed among the U.S. foreign policy establishment—translates into a very broad set of security interests. In attempting to match these expansive ends to the United States' inevitably limited means, U.S. policymakers pursue partnerships with a wide range of countries of all political stripes.⁷ Out of the wide range of American national security priorities, three in particular have impelled U.S. security partnerships with autocrats and democratic backsliders over the last two decades.

The first is the international effort to fight terrorism. After George W. Bush launched the global war on terror, the United States stepped up its efforts to secure cooperation with dozens of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments on counterterrorism issues.⁸ This became a top priority in the Middle East, but has also been a key driver of partnerships in many other places, including South and Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and, more recently, sub-Saharan Africa. The extraordinary breadth of U.S. counterterrorism actions and engagements means that clashes with democracy and rights concerns remain widespread: the United States engaged in counterterrorism cooperation with eighty-five countries between 2018 and 2020, most of which are democratically deficient.⁹ Whether building drone bases in Niger, conducting special operations in Iraq, or providing training to Tajik security forces, the imperative of countering terrorism continues to drive a vast range of cooperative security activities with dozens of autocratic or democratically backsliding governments.

Second, maintaining regional security in the Middle East continues to produce many democracy-security dilemmas. Since the Desert Storm era, the United States has leaned heavily on autocratic partners throughout the region to provide basing rights, support U.S. military operations, share intelligence, and coordinate regional security initiatives. Even as Washington starts to seriously contemplate backing away from its longtime, forward-leaning security posture in the region, the value of close partnerships with countries like Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates remains an article of faith for many parts of the U.S. defense, intelligence, and diplomatic establishments.

Third, a growing driver of trade-offs between democracy and security is the expanding U.S. effort to manage strategic competition with China. While ensuring a “free and open Indo-Pacific” rests on partnerships with key democratic allies, above all Australia, Japan, and South Korea, the U.S. response to China's rise also involves maintaining or deepening security ties with a range of democratic backsliders, like India and the Philippines, as well as some outright autocracies like Thailand and Vietnam.

The geopolitical scope and functional diversity of the democracy-security dilemma in U.S. foreign policy is striking. The security partnerships that pose the dilemma range from relatively transactional relationships rooted in very specific areas of common action to comprehensive partnerships that entail deep cooperation across a host of areas. Similarly varied is the range of democracy and rights issues at stake. In some fully authoritarian contexts, Washington may be focused on encouraging the government to reduce the severity of ongoing repression or contemplate some very basic forms of political liberalization. In competitive authoritarian contexts, the emphasis might instead be on guaranteeing political rights for the opposition, maintaining whatever space exists for independent civil society, or safeguarding at least a modicum of independent media. And in countries where backsliding is just starting, U.S. policymakers may focus instead on curtailing illiberal rhetoric, preserving the integrity of electoral processes, or stepping back from efforts to undercut judicial independence.

To illuminate in detail some of the varieties and complexities of the democracy-security dilemma, we turn now to the three case studies, one of which (Egypt) presents a situation with a consolidated authoritarian regime, one (Turkey) a competitive authoritarian regime, and one (India) a fairly recent backslider.

Egypt

Egypt became a close security partner of the United States after making peace with Israel in the late 1970s. Since that time, it has been one of the largest recipients of U.S. security assistance, receiving more than \$50 billion.¹⁰ The U.S. interest in this security partnership, primarily Egypt's continued peaceful co-existence with Israel, has largely trumped whatever concerns U.S. administrations have had about the authoritarian politics that have prevailed in Egypt for most of the last forty years. Up until the mid-2000s, this U.S. acceptance of Egyptian authoritarianism was never seriously questioned within policy circles. In the past fifteen years, however, the issue has periodically emerged as a source of contention between the two governments.

Democracy on the Table

Issues of democracy and human rights first arose in a significant way in U.S.-Egypt relations during the presidency of George W. Bush.¹¹ As Bush and his team gravitated toward the idea that supporting democracy would undercut the roots of violent Islamic radicalism in the Middle East, they viewed Egypt as a critical case for their new push on democracy. To that end, Bush surprised Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's president at the time, by openly nudging

him on the country's democratic deficit. That effort, and related actions by senior members of Bush's team, did not go far in the face of stonewalling on the part of the Egyptian leader.¹² The Bush administration's general enthusiasm for democratic change in Arab countries faded fairly quickly as the administration became bogged down in Iraq and the victory of Hamas in the 2006 Palestinian elections raised the specter of Arab political liberalization yielding Islamist gains.

The democracy issue re-emerged when massive anti-Mubarak protests hit Egypt in early 2011 amid the broader Arab Spring movement. Barack Obama and his team agonized over whether to support the protesters and what stance to take vis-à-vis Mubarak. Despite the accusations by some critics that Obama threw Mubarak under the proverbial bus, in fact, Obama and his team supported Mubarak up until the point when, in late January 2011, it became clear the Egyptian leader could not survive the protests. Recognizing the regime's fragility and the extent of popular opposition, Obama stated in a February 1 speech that "what is clear—and what I indicated tonight to President Mubarak—is my belief that an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now."¹³ Ten days later, Mubarak resigned.

The Obama administration then tried to bolster Egypt's shaky democratic transition by supporting elections, stepping up democracy-related assistance, and attempting to work constructively with Egypt's first elected civilian president, Mohamed Morsi. But after the military coup in July 2013 that brought Sisi to power—which the Obama administration notably opted not to designate as a coup, as doing so would have had far-reaching implications for the security relationship under U.S. law—Washington failed to maintain a significant focus on democracy and rights concerns.¹⁴

Relations were complicated by Sisi's aggressive crackdown in the weeks and months after the coup. When Egyptian security forces slaughtered at least 800 pro-Morsi protesters in Raba Square and Nahda Square in August 2013, the White House condemned the actions and canceled a joint military exercise with the Egyptians.¹⁵ Obama stated that "our traditional cooperation cannot continue as usual when civilians are being killed."¹⁶ Two months later, the State Department announced a "recalibration" of assistance to Egypt: it would not complete the scheduled deliveries of AH-64 Apache helicopters, M1 Abrams tanks, and Harpoon anti-ship missiles to Egypt.¹⁷ The next year, Congress stipulated that in order for the planned \$1.3 billion in military assistance to be disbursed to Egypt, the Sisi-led government would need to hold a constitutional referendum, take steps toward a democratic transition, and hold parliamentary and presidential elections.¹⁸

Yet as Sisi consolidated his regime, the Obama administration wavered. Within a few months, shortly after Egypt began participating in military operations as a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, the Obama administration backed off its restrictions on aid and announced that the previously withheld Apache helicopters would be delivered to Egypt.¹⁹ It also released \$650 million in foreign military financing (FMF) despite then U.S. secretary of defense Chuck Hagel's determination that the United States was "not yet able to

certify that Egypt is taking steps to support a democratic transition.”²⁰ The administration continued to waive human rights conditions for military aid packages over the following years, citing national security interests.

By 2015, the White House was openly pushing for human rights and democracy aid conditionality to be removed from appropriations legislation so that it would not have to issue an awkward certification of political progress that was clearly not actually happening. After a call with Sisi in March 2015, Obama announced that he would lift holds on military equipment delivery that had been in place since October 2013 and would once again seek \$1.3 billion annually in military assistance for Egypt.²¹ Obama stressed that future military assistance for Egypt would be refocused on the core areas in which U.S. and Egyptian interests aligned, namely counterterrorism efforts, maritime security, border security, Sinai security, and the maintenance of Egypt’s existing weapons arsenal.²² But the core fact remained: military aid continued to flow.

The Trump Years

Any lingering tensions between security priorities and democracy support fell away altogether during the Trump administration. Trump warmly embraced Sisi as his “favorite dictator” early in his presidency and publicly confirmed his faith in the United States’ security partnership with Egypt, stating, “I just want to let everybody know in case there was any doubt that we are very much behind President al-Sisi. He’s done a fantastic job in a very difficult situation.”²³ Trump maintained this effusive stance throughout his presidency despite the fact that the Egyptian regime grew even more repressive, cracking down brutally against political opponents, civic activists, and intellectuals, including some U.S. citizens. Trump warmly received Sisi at the White House in 2019 and, at Sisi’s request, engaged the United States in Egypt and Sudan’s ongoing dispute with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Washington brokered talks between the two sides, and, after they broke down and Ethiopia began filling the dam, then U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo froze over \$100 million in aid to push Ethiopia toward a settlement agreement.²⁴

Some minor limits to U.S.-Egyptian security cooperation were visible during the Trump years. The Trump administration considered designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a foreign terrorist organization in 2019, which would have fulfilled a long-time goal of Egypt’s, but it ultimately chose not to do so.²⁵ In addition, while Egypt initially joined Trump’s Middle East Strategic Alliance Initiative, a plan to contain Iranian power by building an “Arab NATO,” it ultimately withdrew due to the risks associated with directly antagonizing Iran.²⁶ The United States and Egypt also faced tensions over their differing stances on Libya’s two sets of opposing authorities, where the United States supported the Government of National Accord and Egypt supported the Libyan National Army led by Khalifa Haftar. Sisi also continued to diversify Egypt’s arms procurement strategy, including through a \$2 billion purchase of Russian Su-35 fighter jets, which forced Washington to consider whether to respond with sanctions under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act.²⁷

Overall, however, friendship between Washington and Cairo flourished during the Trump years and was rarely encumbered by human rights or democracy concerns. The most significant action the Trump administration took on democracy-related issues was to withhold aid on the basis of Egypt's adoption of a law that limited foreign funding for domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and enduring U.S. frustration over Egypt's 2013 conviction of NGO workers (including from the U.S.-based International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute). In August 2017, then secretary of state Rex Tillerson notified the Egyptian government that his department was placing an executive hold on \$195 million in FMF until the government overturned the convictions and loosened the law. This pressure resulted in limited concessions as an Egyptian court acquitted some of the foreign NGO workers and suspended implementation of the NGO law; Pompeo eventually released the funds in 2018.²⁸

A late highlight of the Trump administration's inaction on human rights in Egypt came in 2020, when some officials at the State Department reportedly proposed a freeze on up to \$300 million in conditioned FMF in response to the death of Mustafa Kassem, a dual Egyptian-U.S. citizen who died while imprisoned on spurious terrorism-related charges. Pompeo balked.²⁹ Instead, when pressed on the matter in a congressional hearing, Pompeo highlighted the difference between autocrats who are "trying to wipe entire nations off the face of the Earth" and others, like Sisi, who "are actually partnering with us to help keep America safe."³⁰

Biden's Turn

As a presidential candidate, Joe Biden raised hopes among some observers for a fundamental rebalancing of the U.S.-Egypt relationship. In July 2020, Biden tweeted that there would be "no more blank checks for Trump's favorite dictator," and in November of that year, Secretary of State-designate Antony Blinken publicly criticized the arrest of staffers at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, a prominent rights group.³¹ Recognizing that the environment in Washington was about to change, Sisi's government released the prisoners—and underwrote a \$65,000-per-month lobbying initiative to bolster Egypt's reputation.³² Despite their elevated rhetoric on democracy and rights, the Biden team approved \$200 million in missile sales to Egypt in February 2021.³³ At the same time, Biden personally sought to keep a principled distance from Sisi's repression, refusing to call the Egyptian leader for the first four months of his term and ordering a U.S. sign-on to criticism of Egypt at the UN Human Rights Council.³⁴

The dynamic shifted in May 2021. Facing a surge in violence between Israel and Hamas, Biden's team leaned heavily on Egypt to broker a ceasefire, which it duly delivered. Biden rewarded Sisi for this effort with two phone calls, a pledge to keep an open line of communication, and a friendly visit from Blinken. Though both Biden and Blinken raised human

rights concerns—Blinken’s discussion with Sisi on the topic reportedly lasted for an hour, while Biden sought to establish a “constructive” human rights dialogue—Sisi has taken little meaningful action in response.³⁵

Instead, Sisi may have been emboldened by the warming ties with the United States: in June, his spy chief, Abbas Kamel, reportedly pressed members of the U.S. Congress on why Egyptian-American human rights activist Mohamed Soltan had not been imprisoned in the United States.³⁶ This bizarre incident came at an awkward time for the Biden administration, which was grappling with whether or not to continue the long pattern of issuing a national security waiver to provide Egypt with military aid despite the terrible human rights situation. Reflecting rising frustration within the administration at Egypt’s inaction, however, the president decided in September not to waive conditionality and to withhold \$130 million out of the \$300 million in conditioned aid. The administration reportedly communicated new conditions for the aid to be released, demanding that Egypt end a series of prosecutions against civil society organizations and drops charges against or release sixteen individuals whose cases Washington has repeatedly raised with Sisi.³⁷

In short, Biden’s determination to elevate the place of democracy and rights in U.S. policy toward Sisi’s Egypt has already clashed sharply with the deeply rooted habit of maintaining close security ties with the country. The result so far has been more continuity than change. Washington’s desire to push on these issues has not translated into actions that would call into question the main elements of the decades-old partnership. Yet the Biden administration will almost certainly continue to look for ways to persuade or pressure the Egyptian leader to curtail his extraordinarily repressive and antidemocratic domestic policies, though it remains unclear whether the United States will be willing to go further in using security assistance—its primary source of leverage—to achieve this objective.

Turkey

Since the end of the Cold War, U.S.-Turkish relations have moved steadily away from the shared strategic outlook established in the years after World War II. Especially during the past two decades, Turkish and U.S. policies have diverged as Turkey, under the leadership of Erdoğan, has pursued a more unilateral and confrontational foreign policy in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean, while the United States has pursued regional stability and counterterrorism in ways that have often run counter to Turkey’s wishes. Although Turkey remains a treaty ally as a member of NATO, strategic frictions between the two countries have multiplied and the overall bilateral relationship has become deeply mistrustful and frequently antagonistic. This evolution has occurred in parallel with the

deterioration of Turkish democracy under Erdoğan's rule and the collapse of the idea, which once held sway among U.S. policymakers, that Turkey could serve as a democratic model for other Muslim-majority countries.

Descent Into Antagonism

Though the United States and Turkey were closely aligned in the early 2000s—Turkey was the first Muslim-majority nation to express condolences over the September 11 attacks and readily sent troops to support the U.S.-backed invasion of Afghanistan—cracks began to emerge as the United States ramped up its war in Iraq.³⁸ Despite Erdoğan's initial willingness to support the U.S. intervention in Iraq, concerns within the Turkish policy establishment quickly grew over the possibility that the intervention would destabilize the country and would allow a semi-autonomous Kurdish state to emerge in Iraq's northern regions.³⁹ Many Turkish observers feared that such a development might energize separatists among the millions of Kurds living in the eastern regions of Turkey and bolster the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a militia the Turkish government has battled intermittently since 1984. Turkish public opposition to the war and concerns that it would inflame separatism led the Turkish parliament to vote against authorizing the United States to use Turkish bases and ports for an invasion of Iraq, upending U.S. military planning and sowing animosity between the Pentagon and the Turkish National Defense Ministry.⁴⁰

Yet at the same time, Bush and his team, striving to hold out democracy as the solution to violent Islamic radicalism globally, embraced the idea of Turkey as an example of democratic success in a Muslim-majority country. National security officials like Paul Wolfowitz, who declared that Turkey “can be an example for the Muslim World,” sought to project confidence that a Turkish model might work in other Muslim-majority countries including, notably, Iraq.⁴¹ This quickly became the administration's central refrain on Turkish democracy. Bush encapsulated this in 2004, when he declared in a visit to Turkey that “your country, with 150 years of democratic and social reform, stands as a model to others, and as Europe's bridge to the wider world.”⁴²

During the Obama years, additional strategic differences began to accumulate. Two early points of contention were Erdoğan's increasingly fractious relations with Israel and Turkey's decision in 2010 to vote in the UN Security Council against sanctioning Iran over its nuclear program. The unfolding of the Arab Spring added significant new complexities to the U.S.-Turkish relationship. Turkey saw the sudden surge of political energy in various Arab countries as a chance to support the Muslim Brotherhood's quest for greater political power across the region. Although it cast this policy as pro-democratic, it diverged in important ways from the U.S. approach to the region, especially vis-à-vis Egypt after the removal of Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

Yet the key strategic divergence during this era was over Syria. Although the United States and Turkey had both opposed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the early days of the civil war, the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in 2014–2015 changed the American strategic outlook. Looking to avoid an extensive boots-on-the-ground commitment, the United States sought Turkey's aid in countering the Islamic State, which was rapidly expanding along the Turkish border. Yet Erdoğan demurred; as a result, the United States pivoted to a partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a group composed largely of Kurdish militias like the People's Protection Units (YPG). Diverging views over each country's interests in the conflict—the United States prioritized countering the Islamic State, while Turkey viewed Assad's regime as the bigger threat—were exacerbated by the Turkish government's belief that the YPG and, by extension, the SDF, were aligned with the PKK.⁴³ This severely hampered U.S.-Turkish cooperation in the conflict, and Turkey has continually accused the United States of supporting anti-Turkish terrorists—an objection that became more domestically salient as peace talks with the PKK collapsed and violence surged in 2015 and 2016.⁴⁴

Throughout the first Obama administration, the president and his team clung to the line that Turkey was a democratic model for the region.⁴⁵ Reluctance to give up on this notion led Washington to overlook or downplay the sharp antidemocratic trend in Turkey, which was marked by Erdoğan's growing efforts to constrain space for political opposition, restrict independent civil society, and reduce press freedom. This U.S. stance finally broke down in 2013 when Erdoğan's violent repression of the Gezi Park protests threw into sharp relief how far Turkish democracy had deteriorated. As Obama and his team shifted toward a chillier, more transactional approach to Erdoğan, the Turkish leader began depicting United States as a power bent on undermining Turkish political sovereignty and stability.⁴⁶ This dynamic only accelerated in the wake of the 2016 coup attempt against Erdoğan, which he blamed on the U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen and, by extension, the U.S. government. The ensuing crackdown—including the imprisonment of tens of thousands of alleged Gülenists—further cemented Washington's view of Turkey's antidemocratic realities and underscored Erdoğan's determination to make the United States Turkey's greatest political bogeyman.⁴⁷

The Trump Years

During the Trump administration, antagonism between Ankara and Washington on strategic matters intensified as Turkey moved further along its path of strategic autonomy. Erdoğan's decision to acquire Russia's S-400 missile defense system, and to develop closer relations with Russia more generally, produced serious unhappiness in Washington and other NATO capitals. Tensions continued to simmer over the conflicting approaches to the Kurdish forces, although Trump's drawdown of U.S. forces and acquiescence to Turkey's assault on Kurds in northern Syria reflected Trump's wish to disengage from the Syrian conflict—a position that put him in alignment with Erdoğan, but at odds with virtually

all of his advisers, including secretary of defense Jim Mattis, who resigned in protest at the move.⁴⁸ A naval confrontation in 2020 between Turkey and Greece over energy claims in the Eastern Mediterranean and Turkey's support for Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh war further muddied the waters. Trump maintained an open, and in some ways friendly, line to Erdoğan as part of his forgiving approach toward many foreign strongmen leaders. Yet the rest of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, including the most influential voices in Congress, essentially gave up on Erdoğan as a security partner, seeing him as an unreliable political and geostrategic provocateur. The White House's decision in July 2019 to block the sale of F-35s to Turkey, coupled with Congress's quiet refusal to approve any arms sales to Turkey from 2018 onward, punctuated this shift.⁴⁹

In keeping with Trump's disinclination to push on democracy and human rights issues, his administration exerted no systematic criticism or pressure on Turkey relating to its ever-worsening domestic political situation. The only exceptions were a few selective human rights cases. The most visible of these involved Andrew Brunson, an American evangelical pastor at a small church in Izmir, who was arrested in the post-2016 repressive sweep in Turkey and charged with working with U.S. intelligence services, Gülenist elements, and Kurdish extremists to overthrow the government. The Trump team, especially Pompeo and then vice president Mike Pence—urged on by U.S. evangelicals—undertook strong efforts to get Brunson released, including imposing Global Magnitsky sanctions against Turkey's interior and justice ministers in 2018.⁵⁰

Biden's Turn

The strategic divergence between the United States and Turkey has continued to grow under the Biden administration. Biden inherited a relationship already strained by Turkey's acquisition of the S-400 missile system, U.S. resourcing of the SDF, and Erdoğan's anti-American rhetoric. This compounding mutual frustration has deepened as the Biden administration has elevated democracy and rights alongside security concerns.

Biden has taken a markedly different tone on democracy and rights than his predecessors. During his campaign, he candidly referred to Erdoğan as an "autocrat" and suggested in a private meeting with editors at the *New York Times* that he would make it "clear that we support opposition leadership" and would embolden those leaders to "take on and defeat Erdoğan."⁵¹ Since assuming office, the president has projected a calculated coldness toward Erdoğan. Biden was in office for three months before he called the Turkish leader—and only then to tell him that the administration would officially recognize the Armenian genocide.⁵²

More than any recent administration, Biden's team has openly called out Turkey's declining democratic environment. U.S. officials have criticized the imprisonment of philanthropist Osman Kavala, a government crackdown on student protesters, Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on preventing violence against women, and proposals to dissolve the opposition People's Democratic Party.⁵³ Turkey also spurred the ire of U.S. diplomats

when it used its veto power to water down a NATO statement condemning Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's forced landing of a Ryanair flight carrying dissident Roman Protasevich.⁵⁴ In a hearing in July 2021 on U.S.-Turkey relations, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland underscored that the U.S. government is engaging the Turkish government at all levels on multiple specific rights cases, as well as conveying concerns about declining media freedom, threats to free assembly and association, declining judicial independence, and eroding fair trial guarantees.⁵⁵

Amid a deepening economic and popularity crisis at home, Erdoğan's response to these criticisms has been more muted than his fiery reactions to earlier episodes of U.S. political engagement. Instead, Erdoğan has carried out a modest charm offensive to ease strains with the West. He has complied with U.S. and EU demands to back down from maritime conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean, stepped up in Afghanistan in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal, and refused to inflame domestic outrage over the Armenian genocide designation. These moves improved the tone of the relationship slightly. After their meeting on the margins of the June 2021 NATO summit, Biden and Erdoğan projected vague optimism about their ability to resolve outstanding issues in the relationship.⁵⁶ Yet democracy and human rights were apparently left off of the agenda for their conversation, raising questions about how hard the United States is willing to push on the issue.

In sum, with the transition from Trump to Biden, Turkey's democratic decline now registers as a serious concern in the White House alongside the battery of frictions that have arisen from Turkey's anti-Western antagonism and the two countries' diverging strategic perspectives. As Biden and his team highlight their unhappiness over democracy and human rights issues, they recognize that relations are bound to be transactional and cool, at best, for the foreseeable future. Whether the Turkish leader might make concessions on either the domestic or foreign policy fronts, and possibly try to use positive action in one domain to counterbalance obstructions in another, is a critical but murky question.

India

In stark contrast to the widening gulf between the United States and Turkey, Washington's relations with India have grown significantly closer over the past twenty years. After decades of intermittently frosty ties during the Cold War, shaped especially by India's strategic neutrality and the United States' episodically close relations with Pakistan, the trajectory of the U.S.-India relationship shifted drastically around the turn of the millennium. Ballooning trade and investment flows between India and the United States grew alongside shared geostrategic interests—none more so than countering China's growing presence and assertiveness in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Though this rapprochement transcended political divides on both sides, it has accelerated significantly since Modi's rise

in the mid-2010s. Modi has been willing to confront the traditional Indian taboo of close security engagement with the United States and has been an eager partner in the U.S.-backed campaign to ensure a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” Yet Modi’s illiberal moves at home have strained the shared values inherent in the U.S.-India relationship, giving rise to the difficult challenge of confronting an important security partner over its increasingly antidemocratic actions.

Roots of Rapprochement

Although the United States and India remained mutually distrustful during the Cold War era as a result of India’s nonaligned foreign policy and nuclear ambitions, the two countries began laying the foundations for a more cooperative relationship in the early 2000s. Bush made overtures to India after the attacks of September 11, 2001, including by lifting the sanctions imposed after India’s 1998 nuclear test and by opening dialogues on a number of key issues. This momentum accelerated even further with the completion of the Civilian Nuclear Cooperation Initiative, which effectively removed U.S. objections to India’s nuclear weapon program, generated over \$100 billion of investment, and opened the door to even closer security and economic links. Having overcome this key barrier, Washington and New Delhi moved rapidly to increase trade between the two countries, deepen new partnerships in multiple issue areas, and foster security cooperation around shared interests in counterterrorism and limiting China’s influence in the broader Indo-Pacific.

A parallel area of collaboration between the Bush administration and the Indian government was on democracy. The two governments were especially focused on strengthening multilateral approaches on democracy and human rights. To that end, the Bush administration worked with India to launch a Democracy Caucus at the United Nations (UN), include India in the Community of Democracies, and increase joint contributions to the UN Democracy Fund.⁵⁷

This strong momentum carried forward into the Obama years, though at a somewhat slower pace. The Obama administration worked to deepen counterterrorism cooperation with New Delhi, which was especially important to India in the aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. Economic ties continued to expand, though previously existing tensions remained, including over Indian tariffs, the offshoring of U.S. service sector jobs, intellectual property issues, and divergent approaches to multilateral trade accord negotiations. In a visit to India in 2010, Obama signaled support for India’s bid for a permanent UN Security Council seat—while noting that India would have new responsibilities, including to champion democratic institutions and human rights. Obama also announced that he would support Indian membership in multiple nuclear nonproliferation agreements, including the Nuclear Suppliers Group and the Missile Technology Control Regime. Obama’s support for India’s aspirations to be a global strategic player was well received in India.

Modi's rise to power in 2014 facilitated the further strengthening of strategic ties with the United States. In early 2015, Modi and Obama unveiled a Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region. Security cooperation grew from there, with Obama declaring India a "major defense partner" and entering into a number of defense agreements with India, including multiple arms deals. By the end of his eight years in office, India's importance to the United States' emerging Indo-Pacific strategy had become clear. Broad bipartisan support in the United States for partnership with India—along with an enthusiastic Modi—accelerated the deepening of strategic linkages.⁵⁸

Yet while Modi moved toward even closer security relations, his illiberal politics challenged shared approaches on democracy. Obama commented in his memoir that concerns over the well-being of Indian democracy were central to his perception of the bilateral relationship from his first meeting with then prime minister Manmohan Singh in 2009, especially inasmuch as the Congress Party leadership warned of the ascendant nationalism and anti-Muslim sentiment being espoused by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).⁵⁹ The issue became especially salient with the election of Modi, who had been banned from entering the United States over his failure to halt the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat, where he was governor at the time. Amid an uptick in forced conversions, religious violence, and hostility toward dissenting voices, Obama called on Indians during his 2015 visit to the country to curb violence and discrimination against women, promote religious and racial tolerance, and empower young people.⁶⁰ Upon his return, he mentioned India's religious tensions at the National Prayer Breakfast, stating that "in past years, religious faiths of all types have, on occasion, been targeted by other peoples of faith, simply due to their heritage and their beliefs—acts of intolerance that would have shocked Gandhiji, the person who helped to liberate that nation."⁶¹ Beyond that, however, the Obama administration's public engagement on democracy and rights issues in India was relatively light, likely owing to a combination of not wanting to ruffle feathers in the warming relationship and the mixed signals in what was still the early stage of India's democratic backsliding.

The Trump Years

The U.S.-India relationship continued along on its friendly course under the Trump administration. Reflecting Trump's broader foreign policy priorities, trade and security issues remained the main focus. Growing concerns in both Washington and New Delhi about China's regional assertiveness—including along the Sino-Indian border—cemented the U.S.-India security partnership. Reflecting this, Trump's National Security Strategy shifted terminology away from "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific," a rhetorical change that signaled a rethinking of the scope of the China challenge. This strategic reframing coincided with the rise of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or the Quad—which includes India alongside the United States, Australia, and Japan—as a democratic counterweight to Chinese ambitions.⁶²

U.S.-Indian defense cooperation accelerated during the Trump era. The Modi government finalized billions of dollars in arms purchases from the United States—though it did not accede to Trump’s demands to stop purchasing Russian equipment, including the S-400. U.S. and Indian forces collaborated in tri-service military exercises and signed information and technology sharing agreements. Yet differences remained between the two countries about how to deal with China. While Trump ultimately settled on bellicose rhetoric; a trade war; and inflaming tensions over Taiwan, Uighurs, and Hong Kong, India sought a more balanced approach in navigating “antagonistic cooperation” with China, expanding trade and bilateral diplomacy even as border conflicts with China intensified.⁶³

As India’s democratic slide accelerated, Trump and his team said and did little about it. Modi dealt effectively with Trump, feeding his desire for diplomatic shows and flattery, and Trump—being generally uninterested in democracy as part of U.S. foreign policy—was not overly concerned about Modi’s democratic deficiencies. Even as Modi took increasingly illiberal actions, including enacting discriminatory citizenship laws and repressing dissent in Jammu and Kashmir, the Trump administration didn’t blink. One Trump official did express concern about declining religious freedom in India, but this was eclipsed by Trump’s praise for Modi’s religious tolerance during a visit to Delhi in February 2020—even as anti-Muslim riots were taking place only a few miles from where he spoke.⁶⁴

Biden’s Turn

Building on nearly two decades of warming U.S.-India ties, the Biden administration has sought to broaden the scope of the strategic partnership between the two countries and deepen Indian integration into a shared security architecture. The administration views India’s participation in the Quad as a centerpiece of this effort. In March 2021, Biden participated in the first-ever Quad Leaders’ Meeting, which set out a shared vision and fostered cooperation on issues as diverse as technology regulation, climate change, and public health; Biden hosted another such summit in Washington in September.⁶⁵ The administration has worked to make U.S.-India military-to-military links more robust through multiple visits by high-level U.S. defense representatives to New Delhi and the acceleration of joint military exercises.⁶⁶ Additionally, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and Indian Ambassador to the United States Taranjit Singh Sandhu agreed to resuscitate the U.S.-India Homeland Security Dialogue, which seeks to strengthen cooperation on cybersecurity, technology, and countering violent extremism.⁶⁷ The administration has complemented these security-oriented steps with stepped-up coronavirus aid—including sending over \$100 million in aid amid India’s COVID-19 surge in April 2021—and the launching of a Clean Energy 2030 partnership.⁶⁸

At the same time, India's troubled record on democracy and human rights has returned as a source of tension. Though Modi has largely avoided high-profile moves that would trigger concerns externally, the Biden team is attentive to the overall illiberal trend in the country, including both declining tolerance for minorities and the degradation of democratic and judicial institutions. Senior U.S. officials, such as Blinken, have publicly called attention to shared political values between the two countries, including commitment to "human dignity, in equality of opportunity, the rule of law, fundamental freedoms, including freedom of religion and belief," while also noting that amid democratic shortfalls, both sides should still seek to achieve those ideals.⁶⁹ The administration has raised these concerns privately, too: in his discussions with Modi and Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar during his July visit to New Delhi, Blinken noted human rights and democracy issues in the country as a significant U.S. interest.⁷⁰

In conclusion, warming relations with India have coincided with democratic backsliding under Modi. Though the U.S. administration's concerns about the state of democracy and human rights in India have not significantly changed the trajectory of the relationship, the Biden team is still seeking a path forward that balances democracy, rights, and values with the increasing geostrategic importance of the U.S.-India relationship.

A Policy Assessment Framework

U.S. relations with India, Turkey, and Egypt demonstrate many—though certainly not all—of the different facets of the democracy-security dilemma in U.S. foreign policy. These cases highlight the complexity of the relationship between U.S. democracy and security interests and the fact that trade-offs can vary greatly over time, even within the confines of a single bilateral relationship. To address such complexities effectively, U.S. policymakers need to move beyond ad hoc approaches and discrete decisions that are not linked to a broader strategy—decisions, for example, about what the U.S. president or secretary of state should say about human rights to a particular friendly autocrat in an upcoming visit or how the United States should respond to a sudden incident of democratic regression in a partner country.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to these policy choices. Rather, approaches to individual security partners should be determined by a common analytical framework. To develop policies in a consistent way, and to bolster efforts to support democracy and rights despite competing interests at stake, policymakers facing the democracy-security dilemma vis-à-vis a particular country should answer five key inter-related questions.

First, what are the specific security interests that the partnership with the foreign government in question will help advance?

This may seem as though it should be obvious, but often it is not. A quick survey of the U.S. interagency landscape with regard to any foreign partner will likely find many different, often clashing, views of what U.S. security interests are at stake. Such tensions are frequently not reconciled with each other and may not be fully reconcilable—but they must at least be acknowledged. Moreover, views within the U.S. government about how security partnerships further U.S. interests tend to calcify and continue on bureaucratic autopilot. U.S. security assistance to Egypt, for example, has persisted at the same level for nearly fifty years despite regional relations with Israel having fundamentally shifted. Regular reevaluation of such views is essential. As a starting point, then, policymakers must identify and articulate the interests at stake in a given security partnership—an exercise fundamental to good policymaking, but which, too often, has been overlooked in day-to-day execution of U.S. policy.

Second, what is the relationship between the security interests that the United States hopes the partnership will serve and the problematic democratic situation of the partner?

Any simplistic assumptions about this relationship must be eschewed. Three quite different scenarios turn up across different relationships: 1) U.S. security interests and the political state of the partner are not closely linked; 2) U.S. security interests will likely benefit if the democratic situation of the country improves; or 3) U.S. security interests may suffer if democracy advances. Moreover, different relationships between security interests and democratic progress can exist within a single country if there are very different U.S. security interests at play, as is often the case.

U.S. relations with Egypt highlight the complexities of this question. Different parts of the U.S. policy community have offered all three of the above answers in recent years to the basic question of how U.S. security interests in Egypt and the region are affected by Sisi's harsh authoritarian path. Perhaps the most common view within the foreign policy bureaucracy, especially the defense and intelligence sectors, is that Egypt is serving U.S. security interests well despite its regrettable autocratic politics—that, in effect, security and domestic politics are disconnected. Some would even go further and argue that political liberalization or democratization in Egypt might negatively affect U.S. security interests, citing, for example, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood under the short-lived Morsi administration. Yet different voices, including many civil society actors, sometimes contend that Sisi's relentless repression may, over time, lead to greater radicalism and potential instability in Egypt. In other words, over the long term, U.S. security interests may well be hurt by Egypt's authoritarianism.

Turkey presents a contrasting picture. The rise of political illiberalism under Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party is strongly associated with the emergence of a unilateral Turkish foreign policy that is often antagonistic to U.S. security interests. Yet the

relationship of Turkish politics to U.S. security interests is complex when viewed in a longer-term perspective—Washington felt that its security interests were well served by Turkey when it was ruled by successive nondemocratic military governments prior to the 2000s. For some observers, therefore, the negative association for U.S. security interests is not with a lack of democracy per se in Turkey, but rather the rising power and policies of a particular political leader, Erdoğan, who in fact came to power through democratic means.

India offers still a different challenge. Thus far at least, India's rising illiberalism has not tangibly affected how the country serves U.S. security interests in the region—India is not a less willing or effective member of the Indo-Pacific partnership as a result of its democratic backsliding. The BJP's political hegemony may have even given it the latitude to make potentially unpopular decisions about expanding security ties with the United States, a longtime taboo in Indian politics. At the same time, U.S. policymakers and outside experts believe that India will be less diplomatically and economically successful if it continues to expand discrimination against minorities and constrain basic freedoms—and thus be a less robust security partner for the United States over time. But as with similar arguments regarding the long-term damage that Egypt's antidemocratic politics may have on its utility as a security partner, these arguments tend to only be persuasive to some parts of the policy community.

Third, how might U.S. security interests be threatened if the United States pushes a particular security partner harder on democracy?

A persistent tendency in the U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy is to assume a negative effect: that pushing the security partner on democracy issues will make it less helpful with regard to U.S. security objectives. This has been the assumption, for example, of many policymakers working on Egypt over the years, undergirding the persistent U.S. reluctance to push the Egyptian government on its antidemocratic and repressive politics.

Yet in many, arguably most, cases, the security interests that Washington hopes the partner will help with are mutual interests, not just those of the United States alone. India's willingness to take an increasingly tough stance vis-à-vis China is not something that it does because Washington wants it to, but out of its own self-interest. Egypt's brokering of peaceful relations between Hamas and Israel at times of crisis is very useful from Washington's point of view, but also serves Cairo's interests, since open conflict between Israel and Hamas could potentially destabilize Egypt. The notion that the security partner is taking a given stance on a certain issue as a favor to Washington—and thereby may abandon that stance if Washington is not nice to it—is frequently incorrect.

Moreover, policymakers should recognize that soft-pedaling concern over a democracy or rights issue will not necessarily ensure that a security partner will refrain from withholding cooperation on an important security issue. For example, the United States' relatively soft responses to Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's illiberal actions have not stopped him

from threatening at various times to discontinue defense cooperation with the United States.⁷¹ The contrary is sometimes the case: if Washington comes on relatively strongly with its democracy or rights concerns, such as by having a top-level official raise it in a pointed fashion with a foreign counterpart, the partner government in question may calculate that this is a matter of real importance on the U.S. side and that pushing back by curtailing security cooperation may only result in still further escalation.

Of course, there will be some instances where U.S. security interests may in fact be impeded if U.S. relations with the security partner turn chillier as a result of greater attention to issues of human rights and democracy. The point is that a careful, sober analysis of this question needs to be carried out as part of formulating a policy stance. This analysis must not rest on an automatic assumption that any pressure at all may immediately turn the security partner away from the particular interests that the United States cares about.

Fourth, how can the United States raise democracy and rights issues with a politically problematic security partner in a way that maximizes the potential to advance democratic progress?

Where possible, calling attention to democracy issues should emphasize the self-interest of the government in question rather than just appealing to generic democratic principles and norms. This may mean highlighting how Turkish constraints on pro-Kurdish political parties might embolden groups like the PKK; how crackdowns on foreign-backed NGOs in India might hinder rural economic development; or how the politicization of legal institutions in Egypt hinders foreign investment. Such arguments have to be carefully tailored to the local context. But framing democracy and rights issues in terms of self-interest is not merely an exercise in artfulness about addressing difficult topics; instead, such arguments are critically important and more likely to be at least somewhat persuasive.

In pressing their case on democracy and rights with a foreign partner, U.S. policymakers often focus on specific human rights cases, particularly ones involving U.S. citizens like Andrew Brunson or Mohamed Soltan, who have been imprisoned in violation of their basic rights. A focus on such cases gives U.S. diplomats something very definite to press on, and when a positive response is achieved, allows them to point to definite results—with double points for having helped an American citizen and for making concrete progress on democracy and human rights.

Yet while these discrete interventions are undoubtedly important, policymakers should go beyond specific rights cases and give attention to core structural issues. These are often key democratic guardrails that are under attack—such as discriminatory citizenship laws in India, the banning of opposition parties in Turkey, and legal constraints on independent civil society in Egypt. Attention to such issues may well be less comfortable for U.S. policymakers—it will be perceived as more intrusive and much less welcome. Yet without it, U.S. policymakers are consigning themselves to addressing symptoms more than causes of democratic decline.

When the United States decides it will try to push for progress on democracy and rights, policymakers also need to be clear about what their redlines are. If and when democracy and rights violations begin to mount, the United States needs to set clear limits on what it will tolerate and be prepared to respond if those lines are crossed. U.S. presidents have set redlines after the fact with Egypt, for example—Obama suspended some security aid in response to massacres in 2013—but have generally relented after a matter of months. The message this sends is that U.S. frustration is fleeting and that any resulting pressure will be temporary. Instead, officials should prepare a menu of options, from issuing public statements to suspending aid or imposing sanctions, to rapidly deploy in the hopes of deterring future malign conduct. Such considerations are especially important when U.S. security aid has potentially played a role in rights violations, as a paramount U.S. concern must be avoiding complicity. Oversight and evaluation are a crucial part of this work.⁷²

Fifth, what is reasonable to expect to achieve by pushing harder on democracy?

Policymakers too often set an unrealistically high bar for progress on democracy and rights and decide they shouldn't proceed at all because they cannot meet it. They should not expect some modest pressure from Washington to reverse the overall path of democratic backsliding of a partner country or somehow turn an authoritarian partner into a liberal democracy. But they should not assume that they should not try to do anything on the democracy and rights front because such maximal goals are out of reach. Policymakers need to assess the sources, motivations, and patterns of the troubled democracy and rights situation of the partner in order to estimate whether enhanced U.S. engagement would motivate the leaders of the country in question to limit, at least to some degree, the range and severity of the antidemocratic conditions they oversee or new antidemocratic steps they are taking. Very different answers about what is possible will emerge in full authoritarian countries than in places where some degree of political competition still exists or where democratic backsliding is still incipient.

In addition, policymakers should not limit their expectations for positive change only to potential liberalizing actions by the partner government. They should also ask whether greater attention from the United States on democracy issues helps bolster the will and steadfastness of embattled leaders in civil society or the political opposition of the country in question. A common mistake is to think of the push on democracy and rights issues with a problematic security partner only in terms of effects on the government. But other parts of the political and civic communities are highly important and reactive to external signals. However, U.S. policymakers need to be careful of crossing the line between support and perceived (or real) interference in a foreign country's domestic politics. For example, pushing the government hard on maintaining electoral integrity may be more effective than expressing direct support for opposition forces.

U.S. officials should also evaluate the regional and global signaling effects of stepping engagement up on democracy with a particular country. Speaking out on democracy challenges in India, for example, may have positive signaling effects on other countries in South Asia

given India's heft in the region; so, too, may raising these issues with Turkey signal what is in store if other NATO allies, like Hungary and Poland, continue down the path of democratic backsliding. There are often wider benefits to engaging on democracy and human rights, so policymakers should avoid the tendency to think of responses to the democracy-security dilemma in a particular country as relating only to that country.

By utilizing this framework to think through and develop policies toward specific countries, U.S. policymakers will not necessarily be able to resolve the inevitable difficulties that exist in trying to balance U.S. interests in supporting democracy globally while maintaining useful security relationships with democratically deficient partners. Clashes between these interests—as in any dilemma—involve very difficult trade-offs that are unlikely to bring about any simple resolution. This has been a reality of U.S. foreign policy for many decades and will likely continue to be for many more.

But such a framework can help the Biden administration and successor administrations craft policies that avoid ad hoc lurches in one direction and make trade-offs that reflect an accurate weighing of the gains and losses involved with all interests at stake. By doing so, they will be more likely to find productive ways to advance democracy and rights, even if only modestly, while also avoiding the powerful tendency to back down at the first hint of clashing interests.

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