

29 February 2024

Ted Perkin

What does the 2024 Indian General Election mean for UK foreign policy?

NEW
DIPLOMACY
PROJECT

TOP LINES

- The 2024 Indian election comes at a challenging time for democracy in India. As the largest democracy in the world and a growing global power, the election will have implications for India's relationship with the UK, the West and its neighbours in the region.
- The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has made foreign policy central to domestic politics, emphasising India's status as an independent nation. Narendra Modi's government has rejected Western criticism as neo-colonialism and strengthened India's credentials as an emerging global power.
- India's policy of 'strategic autonomy' or 'omni-alignment' is complicated by its marginalising domestic policies and also growing regional tensions with China, the latter bringing its foreign policy closer to Western powers.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in a commanding position ahead of the 2024 election, with high levels of popularity and influence.
- An opposition coalition, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), has formed to challenge the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the election. INDIA has targeted Modi's record on democracy, human rights and welfare, but its path to success has been complicated by its failure so far to unite around a clear strategy, policy or leadership. INDIA claimed on 16 February 2024 that its bank accounts had been frozen by the Income Tax Department, limiting its ability to fund its campaigning ahead of the election.
- The election is likely to intensify debates around India's national security and religious identity, causing further tensions with its regional rivals and stoking concerns about human rights and democratic standards.

SUMMARY OF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The UK should reverse cuts to the BBC WorldService, including its Hindi language service, and support impartial coverage of the election.
- Engagement with the current and future government should be respectful to India's sovereignty hostility towards foreign comment or intervention.
- Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations will likely stall as elections divert attention and complicate sensitive discussions around immigration. Discussions should continue, ensuring safeguards for key British sectors and mutual commitments on democracy, the environment and human rights.
- The UK should stress its commitment to combating extremism, including violent pro-Khalistani activism, and facilitate co-operation on cases for absconding Indians.

- As a key partner in achieving an Indo-Pacific tilt, the government should prioritise India in debates on immigration, particularly around short-term visas for high-skilled workers.
- India represents a key strategic partner in limiting the People's Republic of China's threat to international stability. However, because of India's reliance on the PRC in key sectors, the British government should not perceive closer trade relations and supply chains with India as straightforward de-risking.
- The UK should promote a permanent Indian seat on the UN Security Council. This could also be an opportunity for reform of the Commonwealth, moving part of its administrative capacities to India.
- The UK Government should build on recent progress in defence relations and seek a formal agreement on joint production, including easing restrictions for British companies investing in India's advanced military technology.

Background

Expected to take place between April and May, the world's largest democracy, India, will have a general election in 2024. This marks a [pivotal year for democracies](#) across the world, with elections also due in the United States, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Taiwan, Mexico, and of course the UK. As an increasingly important economy and strategic force, India's general election holds profound consequences for the UK and the world.

The State of UK-India Relations

The UK and India share a long and complex history, but recent years have seen increasing cooperation across trade, security, and technology.

This relationship is strengthened by the 'living bridge' of 1.7 million British Indians, who form the largest ethnic minority in the UK. A number of British politicians of Indian origin have also risen to prominence, most notably the current Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who has gained popularity in India and with British Indians. After the Conservative party voted him into the position, [Indian media celebrated](#) his heritage, presenting him as the 'son of India' on account of his wife's family, especially her father, the Indian billionaire businessman Narayan Murthy.

Closer partnership with India has been complicated by the BJP government's rhetoric and policies targeted at minority groups, particularly Muslims. For example, the [2019 Citizenship Amendment Act](#), granting accelerated access to Indian citizenship for persecuted religious minorities from neighbouring countries, directly excluded Muslims from its provision.

The state of Indian democracy has deteriorated more broadly, and the nation has fallen 11 places on the [World Press Freedom Index](#) to 161st. After the BBC broadcast a documentary on Modi's role in the 2004 Gujarat riots, the government ordered a [raid on the BBC's India offices](#), one of a number of independent media outlets who the government has accused of tax evasion.

Newspapers are heavily reliant on government advertising and critics are frequently harassed by the BJP's supporters. This partisanship is exacerbated by the [domination of media](#) by the BJP's business affiliates, notably Mukesh Ambani, whose Reliance Industries umbrella owns 70 media outlets with a following of over 800 million Indians.

This has posed problems for the UK, which stated in its [Roadmap for India-UK Future Relations](#) in 2021 that ‘democratic norms and principles are the mainstay for maintaining a rules based international system and respect for universal human rights’.

The British government thus faces tensions between its economic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region, in which India plays a key role, and a challenging outlook for human rights and democracy.

Economic Ties

Since Tony Blair’s government, the economic aspect to UK-India relations has become the dominant concern. The decision in 2012 to cease government aid to India signalled a wider restructuring of the relationship, recognising India as a key economic and strategic partner in its own right.

India currently has significant [business interests](#) in the UK, with 954 companies operating in the UK contributing £944 million in corporate tax and employing 105,931. [Bilateral trade](#) was worth £23.3 billion as of 2019, and could increase by £16.7 billion in 2035 with a comprehensive trade deal.

The [rapid growth](#) of India’s middle class, set to reach almost 250 million 2050, presents a large market with huge growth potential for British firms. Yet, this takes place over the backdrop of a [worsening trade balance](#) with India, as the tariffs faced by UK exports to India rose from an average of 13.4% in 2016 to 18.7% in 2021.

Closer trade relations with India might also facilitate the UK’s strategy of ‘de-risking’ supply chains in strategic sectors. After rights groups protested the abuse of Uyghur people, in 2021 the government introduced [legislation banning the NHS](#) from buying medical supplies made in China’s Xinjiang region.

In this regard, access to India’s large medicine manufacturing sector has been prized as potentially reducing dependency on China in the health sector. However, this potential realignment is complicated by India’s own dependency on China for medicine supplies. In the financial year for 2023, India’s [bulk drug imports](#) from China rose to over 70%. Shifting supply chains to India in key strategic areas will not, therefore, result in straightforward de-risking from China.

A further obstacle to closer trade relations has been the current UK visa system. Under Cameron, the government liberalised visa requirements for Chinese students and investors, causing friction with India given its historic relationship with the UK. The government has loosened visa restrictions for young Indians, but contemporary debates around immigration have made the numbers of visas given to Indians more politically contentious. As a result, [Rishi Sunak has assured critics](#) that an FTA will not include a liberalisation of visa requirements for Indians.

Free Trade Negotiations

In the post-Brexit era, an FTA with India signals the UK's willingness to reorient towards the Indo-Pacific and somewhat mitigate lost trade with EU markets. This would supplement deals agreed with Australia in 2021 and New Zealand in 2022.

Negotiations proceeded quickly and as of the most recent round of discussions, 21 of 26 chapters of discussion had been closed, with the [Union Minister Piyush Goyal optimistic](#) that an agreement on the remaining chapters could be reached.

According to DIT modelling undertaken by the Department for International Trade, an FTA with India would potentially [increase UK GDP](#) by between £3.3 billion and £6.2 billion (0.12-0.22%) in 2035, depending on the purview of a prospective deal. This would stem from an increase in bilateral trade of between £14 billion and £27.7 billion in 2035, and an increase in exports by around £8.8 billion to a total of £16.7 billion.

An agreement would be India's most significant FTA to date and would represent a diplomatic victory for Britain in outpacing the EU to a deal, the latter having [reopened trade negotiations](#) with India in 2022.

FTA negotiations also represent a step towards fulfilling the 2021 Roadmap for closer UK-India relations across the economy, security and the environment. This was 'based on a shared view that the prosperity and security of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific are inextricably linked'. For the UK, therefore, closer economic ties with India are crucial to achieving the Indo-Pacific tilt and a more prosperous and stable international order.

International Standards and Human Rights

The [Business and Human Rights Resource Centre](#) (BHRR) notes particular concerns of 'ongoing violations of human rights and labour rights in India', reflecting wider criticism from advocacy groups levelled at the BJP government's record on human rights. This has affected the UK more directly, with the Indian government [restricting the activity of a number of British charities](#), including Oxfam, whose licence to receive funds from abroad was removed in 2022. To address this, the BHRR has suggested that clauses be inserted linking future agreements with India to UN and ILO human rights conventions.

The UK Government has made a clear commitment to upholding certain democratic and human rights standards. The 2023 Roadmap for India stated, for example, that 'democratic norms and principles are the mainstay for maintaining a rules based international system and respect for universal human rights'. Diplomats should continue to raise the issue of human rights with the Indian government, working with domestic organisations to empower grassroots advocacy.

Defence Relations

In the past decade, the UK has lagged behind America and France in its defence ties with India, with France emerging as India's key military ally in Europe. Indeed, the [Parliamentary Defence Committee's report](#) concluded in 2023 that 'Defence has not achieved its tilt to the Indo-Pacific', arguing that the government required a greater military presence in the region, or else a curbing of its strategic ambitions.

There are strong reasons, both economic and geopolitical, for closer industrial defence partnership. [Russia supplies 65% of India's military purchases](#) worth over \$60 billion over the past twenty years, while [the UK constitutes just 3%](#) of India's new defence acquisitions in the past decade. A shift to British and Western military suppliers would, therefore, reduce India's dependence on Russia, depriving the latter of resources and strengthening the UK's defence interests in the region.

The post-Brexit Indo-Pacific tilt, along with broader concerns about China, have aligned British strategy more closely with India. The result has been progress in bilateral defence relations, such as the 2021 UK-India roadmap. Signed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and then UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the roadmap included defence and security in its 10 year plan for bilateral cooperation. Meetings between the respective National Security Advisors followed in 2022 and 2023, along with a [Defence and Military Technology workshop in 2023](#).

In January 2024 India's Minister of Defence, Rajnath Singh, built on the success of these initiatives by undertaking a three-day visit to the UK. [Several new joint initiatives resulted](#): the UK announced plans to send the Littoral Response Group to the Indian Ocean later this year, and for the Carrier Strike Group to operate and train with Indian forces by 2025, as well as agreements around logistical and cadet exchanges.

Despite these developments, collaboration on industrial military projects remains lacking, partly because of India's restrictive system of defence procurement. A [Strategic Comment by the International Institute for Strategic Studies](#) notes the 'three-I' obstacles to UK companies engaging with Indian defence: foreign investment, intellectual property rights, and indigenous-content requirements.

Narendra Modi's protectionist 'Made in India' policy, introduced in 2014, placed substantial restrictions on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the defence sector. Coupled with weak intellectual property laws and requirements that at least 50% of parts and materials used in military equipment be domestically sourced, UK investors and military suppliers have been reluctant to engage with India's defence industry. Securing agreements for greater partnership is crucial to the UK realising the defence aspect to its Indo-Pacific tilt and to becoming a key strategic partner to India.

New Delhi's Security Concerns

As Modi has lent into a more Hindu conception of India, the range of activities deemed 'anti-India' has expanded. Consequently, religious and political minorities who challenge this notion of India, both domestically and abroad, have come under greater pressure from the Indian government.

The Khalistani movement, which seeks to establish an autonomous state for Sikhs in north India, has drawn particular ire from the Modi regime. Sikhs form about 2% of India's population and the separatist contingent have a history of confrontation with the Indian state. Recently, the movement has gained visibility through the large diaspora communities in Canada, the US and the UK, bringing tensions with India, which deems pro-Khalistani activity subversive and has [banned the movement](#).

There has been a spike in allegations of Indian complicity in silencing pro-Khalistani activists abroad, sharpening international concerns around India's breaches of human rights and the rules-based international order. In September 2023, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that [officials were 'actively pursuing credible allegations'](#) linking Indian government agents to the murder of Sikh separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in British Columbia. Modi firmly rejected the allegations, but further tensions followed in November when the US discovered a separate plot, allegedly with links to Indian government officials, [to assassinate an American citizen](#) who had advocated for a separatist Sikh state.

In turn, officials in New Delhi have accused other nations of failing to combat extremist anti-India activity. In March 2023, India censured the UK after Sikh separatist protesters, in response to a mass crackdown by India's police on members of the Khalistan movement in Punjab, [pulled down the Indian flag at India's High Commission in London](#) and broke the building's window. [The Indian Foreign Minister summoned the UK's most senior diplomat in New Delhi](#) and was 'reminded in this regard of the basic obligations of the UK government under the Vienna Convention'. Security around the UK mission at Shantipath and British High Commissioner Alex Eliss' residence were also temporarily removed in a tit-for-tat move.

Furthermore, India has concerns about the UK becoming a hub for safe haven for absconding Indians. Notably, Nirav Modi and Vijay Mallya, both Indian citizens, fled to the UK after charges of fraudulent activity. As of yet, [drawn-out and complex extradition cases](#) have not resulted in their removal to India, leading to charges that the UK has failed to cooperate fully with India's justice system.

The Landscape of Indian Politics

Since the end of Congress' political dominance thirty years ago, India has seen the emergence of a number of coalition governments. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, has held a firm grip on power for the last 9 years and has taken an increasingly assertive position on the global scene. Modi's party has pitched itself as the protector of Hindu rights and national identity, and a provider of welfare support for India's poorest and socially maligned castes.

India suffered [high inflation](#) in the last year, which seemed to have dented Modi's pretensions to re-election. Opinion polls in August, however, had Modi with a 36-point lead over Rahul Gandhi, the former leader of the opposition Congress Party.

Under the BJP's current tenure in power, the integrity of India's democracy has been called into question. Rahul Gandhi was [sentenced to two years](#) in Jail in March 2023 over comments he made in 2019 deemed insulting to Modi and others with that surname. The Supreme Court has since [suspended the conviction](#), returning [Gandhi to parliament](#), but there remain concerns about the independence of the media and judiciary.

In light of the BJP's dominance, 28 parties have [formed a coalition](#) in opposition to the government, uniting under the name of India National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (I.N.D.I.A). Led by the Congress, the alliance presents itself as key to rescuing the nation's democracy from the ruling government. This move sparked apparent concern among the BJP, but Modi's approval ratings have [remained strong](#) among the Indian public.

Ahead of the 2024 election, therefore the BJP has continued to defy anti-incumbency sentiment, which has historically been powerful in Indian politics. In [recent state elections](#), for example the BJP retained power in Madhya Pradesh and took Rajasthan and Chattisgarh from the Congress Party, the latter despite [exit polls](#) predicting the Congress' victory. Though the Congress won the southern state of Telangana in the recent elections and [took Karnataka](#) earlier in the year, the BJP now rules 12 of 28 state governments outright and 3 in coalition.

Thus, the BJP's electoral successes at the state level confirm Modi as the frontrunner in the coming general election.

The Opposition's Prospects

Despite the formidable position of the BJP, [state elections are not predictive](#) of the 2024 election's outcome. The INDIA coalition has shown promise at times in its opposition to the BJP. Notably, Rahul Gandhi, former leader of the Congress Party and the main rival to Modi, boosted his popularity through his [Bharat Joda Yatra](#), a 4,000 km march across India between 2022 and 2023 to unite the nation.

The Congress and its allies stress their [commitment to democracy](#) and restoring the secular foundations of the constitution. This stands in contrast to the BJP's politics of *Hindutva*, a majoritarian ideology that defines the Indian as a Hindu nation. The other prominent [parties constitutive of INDIA](#) are the Trinamool Congress (TMC), which is in power in West Bengal, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), governing Tamil Nadu, and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which holds Delhi and Punjab. A number of other regional parties complete the alliance, some of whom are regional rivals to other coalition partners.

Given current polling, it is unlikely that the INDIA coalition would sweep to an overwhelming victory. However, a strong campaign uniting anti-Modi sentiment might sweep the South and North East, and make indents into the BJP's heartlands in the North, where the [vote share difference](#) between BJP and Congress remained below 10% in recent state elections.

However, the INDIA coalition has been unable to agree on a broader policy platform, a leader or a comprehensive seat-sharing agreement. The latter is significant given that in a number of states the coalition partners are direct rivals, often with sharply contrasting ideological positions.

The BJP's dominance further suggests that the possibility of a large victory for the current opposition is improbable. If the INDIA coalition resolves its internal issues and runs a strong campaign, it could edge the BJP in parts of the electorate, returning a fragile coalition headed by the Congress.

Modi's Foreign Policy

Throughout his tenure as Prime Minister, Modi has placed a high value on India's [strategic autonomy](#). India repeatedly [abstained on UN resolutions](#) condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in part a mark of the historically close relations between the two nations, but also a reflection of Modi's rejection of bipolar and moralistic geopolitics. Rather, he seeks a multipolar world order in which India exists as a leading but independent power.

The BJP's opposition has generally endorsed the geopolitics of strategic autonomy. Rahul Gandhi, for example, supported Modi's position on the Ukraine War despite criticism of his record on democracy and human rights. Though the Congress-led opposition is somewhat more pro-Western, this cautious position has been targeted by the BJP. When Gandhi made comments alleging that Western nations had paid too little attention to the decline of democracy in India, the [BJP struck back](#) by claiming that Gandhi sought 'US, Europe intervention in India'.

Thus, India's foreign allies have been reluctant to challenge Modi's style and policies in power, wary of accusations of foreign intervention. Where forthright criticisms have emerged, as with Canada's allegations of Indian complicity in murdering a Sikh activist on Canadian soil, India's reaction has been combative and non-cooperative.

At the same time, India's historical policy of non-alignment has come under increasing pressure by broader geopolitical shifts. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the rising tensions of the US-China relationship have encouraged India to pivot towards the West, despite its government [refusing to condemn](#) Russia's actions.

Though India remains a member of such [anti-Western organisations](#) as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the space for a position between these poles has diminished. Recent events have therefore squeezed the diplomatic window for India's 'strategic autonomy', the contemporary reshaping of India's Cold War policy of 'non-alignment'.

India's decision to join the Quad with America, Australia, and Japan, is seen as a provocative move to Beijing. India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar has [played down its military components](#), describing the Quad as 'a plurilateral grouping... of countries that have a shared vision of their attributes and values', in distinction to the AUKUS 'security alliance'. Yet, membership of the Quad represents a clear symbolic challenge to China's regional power and aligns India with Western strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

India has claimed an omni-aligned or multipolar foreign policy, while pushing marginalising domestic policies and aggressive stances in the region. So far, this policy has been fairly successful, allowing India to capitalise on Western de-risking without clarifying its position on China or Russia. Should Western positions on China continue or even harden, it is less likely that India will be able to maintain its dual position of both global strategic autonomy and regional confrontation, especially as its own influence and power grows.

Foreign Policy in the 2024 Election

Traditionally, foreign policy has not been a central platform of electoral campaigns. However, the BJP has made India's status as a [great civilisation](#) and [global power](#) central to its electoral appeal. This nationalist emphasis has also expanded the party's appeal beyond its largely Hindu base, tapping into [popular disillusionment](#) with India's portrayal in Western media as an undeveloped nation.

In this spirit, Modi heralded India's presidency of the G20 as a turning point for the nation's foreign policy. Delaying India's G20 presidential tenure closer to the election tied Modi's popularity to his success in restoring India's place as a leading global power. In the C-Voter's

biannual 'Mood of the Nation' [survey in India Today](#), 47% said that India's G20 presidency will enhance the country's global stature and 73% said that it will be a political factor in the 2024 election.

As President of the G20, India has promoted [policies on climate](#), including an International Biofuels Alliance. Novel policies on governance and the digital welfare state measure have further positioned India as the [voice of the Global South](#), a status strengthened by its support for the full position of the African Union on the UN Security Council.

With the emergence of foreign policy as an issue of nationalist appeal, India's security and borders have risen in importance too. A [terrorist attack](#) killing 40 Indian paramilitary soldiers in February 2019, for example, resulted in [Indian military operations](#) against Pakistan. This strengthened Modi's domestic popularity, with [one poll](#) finding after the retaliation that 43% of respondents wanted Modi to return as prime minister, seven points higher than in 2014.

It is likely, therefore, that debates around India's security, borders and place on the global stage will be intensified and polarised in the coming months. The two leading party coalitions are reluctant to ally India's foreign policy officially with any one power or bloc. At the same time, growing competition with China has pushed India to closer relations with the West across security and trade, even as it seeks to reap the benefits of its strategic autonomy.

The Significance for the UK

Trade Negotiations

In line with longer-term shifts, the Government's interests in India are primarily economic. Because of India's rapid growth, the UK has made a bilateral Free Trade Agreement a central target of trade policy.

Given India's overall trade deficit of \$263 billion, its government is wary of granting the UK significant access to domestic markets. Concerns have been raised that because of political and economic pressures, the UK might compromise on market access and international standards to get an agreement over the line before the upcoming British election. This would lead to unsatisfactory arrangements for key sectors like the NHS, immigration, and intellectual property.

As campaigning takes up an increasing amount of India's political attention and final sticking points prove challenging to resolve, FTA negotiations have slowed. This has been exacerbated by some Conservatives' anger at suggestions that India would push for more student and worker visas.

It is likely, therefore, that negotiations will not be concluded until after the Indian general election and perhaps also the British election. There are concerns that a new government on either side might delay or undo the progress made thus far. It is unlikely, however, that either the BJP or the INDIA coalition would not continue with the significant progress already made, nor that the election campaign will politically imperil the prospect of an eventual agreement.

Human Rights and Security Co-Operation

Criticism of the Indian government's treatment of minorities and its record on democracy will continue after the 2024 election, particularly in the case of a BJP victory. Longer-term, issues of national identity and Hindu majoritarianism will intensify as the populous Hindu belt in the North is set to receive more seats through the [redrawing of electoral boundaries](#) in 2026.

International actors, including the UK, have a responsibility to work with India to ensure that democratic and human rights standards are upheld in the months leading up to and following the election. Actions that are seen as compromising national sovereignty will almost certainly fuel anti-Western sentiment in India. Therefore, upholding these principles should be advanced through mutual agreements and dialogue where possible.

As part of this co-operation, the British government must also be prepared to work with India on its concerns about national security and jurisdiction. The UK should seek to reassure India on current extradition agreements, maintaining dialogue throughout contested cases. Furthermore, the government should offer assurances of its commitment to India's security, recognising the threat of violent pro-Khalistani activism and strengthening the powers of [the bilateral sub-group combatting extremism](#) established by Boris Johnson and Narendra Modi in 2022.

Stronger rhetoric around Indian statehood and religious identity during the election period may result in pro-Khalistani protests in both domestic and diaspora communities. During the election season, therefore, the police force should offer enhanced protection of the Indian High Commission in London and brief diplomats with messaging around extremist activity.

Strengthening the Defence Partnership

The nationalist rhetoric during the election may worsen India's relations with China, offering potential for closer defence ties between India and the UK. India's defence budget has consistently grown over the past decade and Modi's assertiveness on the global scene will bring the prospect of further spending. Improving the confidence of private British companies' in India's defence industry could bring significant collaboration in industrial projects, developing India's military capabilities as a global power and bringing economic growth to the UK.

Most diplomatic activity between the two nations has been consumed by FTA negotiations, delaying potential agreements on industrial and technological defence collaboration. However, the end of elections in both India and the UK should liberate political and diplomatic efforts for defence agreements.

Therefore, the British government should build on the success of the recent visit by the Indian Defence Minister to the UK by planning a return delegation later in the year. India has demonstrated its willingness to undertake more significant partnerships with Western powers, recently [signing an agreement with France](#) committing to the joint production of defence equipment. The British government should seek to follow the example of France and the US and push for a formal agreement on industrial military projects.

Future dialogue should also explore reducing or removing barriers to British investment and establishing forums for technological exchange and collaboration, building on the discussions that have taken place on maritime electric propulsion systems. The UK could galvanise private

sector investment in Indian defence by securing guarantees around intellectual property and majority ownership, emphasising these enterprises as partnerships that facilitate India's status as an emerging global power.

Geopolitical Consequences for the UK

Since foreign policy has emerged as a mass political issue, the government elected in 2024 will be expected by voters to take an assertive role on the international scene. This is unlikely to affect FTA negotiations, should they be ongoing, but the UK can anticipate the future government to present itself demonstratively as an independent power.

The expanded popular dimensions to Indian foreign policy will increase the pressure to take strident positions elsewhere, complicating the possibility of independent diplomacy between the West and China. This is especially true if a BJP-led coalition returns to power, with a mandate to pursue Modi's assertive foreign policy. An INDIA coalition victory, headed by the Congress, would likely return a somewhat more pro-Western outlook and engage in less inflammatory moves in the contested Kashmir region.

Indian politicians remain wedded to a multipolar world and a foreign policy of non-alignment. Efforts towards closer cooperation should be conscious of this, even as regional competition with China aligns India more closely with Western powers, particularly on security and trade. The confluence of British and Indian interests might, therefore, bring opportunities for considered diplomacy seeking to strengthen India's commitment to democracy and human rights as part of a broader values-based alliance.

Relevance for Labour

In the last twenty years, Labour has had a fraught relationship with India over its human rights record. In 2019, for example, Labour called in a [party conference resolution](#) for international observers in Kashmir following Indian military operations, before soon retracting the statement after a backlash.

This criticism of India's human rights record has a longer history too. After the 2002 Gujarat riots, Labour banned Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat, from visiting Britain, a policy that was in place [until 2012](#).

Partly as a result of Labour's perceived anti-India stance, British Indian sentiment has shifted towards the Conservative Party. Within that community is a large variety of opinion, but a far greater proportion of Hindu voters have approved of Modi than Muslims. Despite this, UK-India relations do not present as a [significant electoral concern](#), even for British voters of Indian origin.

Keir Starmer has [acknowledged mistakes](#) in Labour's approach to India, calling 'to recognise when it comes to India, what an incredible, powerful, important country India is ... and to ensure that we have the right relationship as we go forward'. This marks an effort to win back the trust of the British Indian vote, but also a strategic shift towards closer relations with India. Given

Starmer has committed to [remaining outside the EU](#) single market or customs union, India presents an attractive economic prospect for increased trade and economic growth.

Modi's fierce rebuttal of criticism surrounding human rights and labour standards indicates that Labour's approach to such issues must be more respectful of Indian sovereignty. Progress on these measures is best reached, therefore, through dialogue and bilateral commitment. If elected Prime Minister, Starmer might visit India early-on in his tenure to symbolise the importance of UK-India relations and build on, or sign, an FTA. Negotiating an agreement for joint military production and committing to UN Security Council Reform, including a permanent seat for India, would be a further step in building a closer strategic partnership.

Policy recommendations for the UK Government

As press freedoms come under pressure in India, **the UK government should reverse cuts to the BBC WorldService, including its Hindu language service, and support open coverage of the 2024 Indian election.**

Relations must proceed in the spirit of reciprocity, recognising India's status as an independent power. In light of this, **the UK government should prepare to work with both the BJP and the INDIA coalition and recognise the possibility that negotiations will stall until after India's election.**

While acknowledging India's official position of strategic autonomy, the UK should **seek co-operation on key issues around climate, human rights, and defence.**

The UK should make clear its commitment to both the freedom of speech and to combating extremism on British soil. This means reassurance and collaboration on Indian security, including the threat of violent pro-Khalistan activism in the UK.

Free trade negotiators should seek mutually applicable conditions upholding democracy, human rights, and environmental standards. Whilst British and Indian strategies on China are growing closer, ministers must also be aware that key sectors of the Indian economy are heavily reliant on China. **Shifting supply chains to India in areas like medicine do not, therefore, comprehensively achieve de-risking.**

The UK should prioritise India in debates around immigration, particularly exploring short-term visas for skilled workers. In order to facilitate the exchange of high-skilled workers and students, the government should agree to the mutual recognition of qualifications and ease legal barriers to temporary workplace transfers.

The Foreign Secretary should promote India's role in the UN and Commonwealth and strengthen the UK's commitment to UN Security Council Reform, including a permanent UNSC seat for India. As part of efforts to create a more engaged and comprehensive partnership, the government should **consider moving part of the Commonwealth's Headquarters to India.**

The UK government should explore proposals for India to join a potential pillar 2 of AUKUS and for joint exercises to bolster Britain's presence in the Indo-Pacific. Recently agreed plans around the Littoral Response Group and the Carrier Strike Group could be developed into more comprehensive joint exercises, perhaps including air and ground components.

The government should build on the Indian Defence Minister's visit and **establish avenues for collaboration on industrial military projects, particularly in low-volume advanced technology**. Following elections and the potential conclusion of FTA negotiations, diplomatic efforts should be allocated to defence cooperation, including a reciprocal visit by the UK Defence Minister to India. The minister should discuss lowering FDI limits on military projects and push for joint projects similar to those agreed with France, which would provide greater investor confidence for private British companies seeking to enter the Indian defence sector.

The Author:

Ted Perkin is a recent graduate in History from the University of Cambridge, where he specialised in modern Indian and American foreign policy. He gained experience in elected student politics and mental health advocacy, before working at a social impact venture in education technology.

This paper was reviewed by:

The New Diplomacy Project Committee

*The reviewers of this paper do not formally endorse any of the views or recommendations of the author and this paper.

About the New Diplomacy Project:

The New Diplomacy Project is helping Labour to develop a foreign policy for the 21st Century. Our experienced network of foreign policy researchers provides expert advice to Labour MPs and Lords, from real-time reactions to global events to in-depth policy briefings on complex areas of foreign policy. We seek to expand Labour's capacity to think about foreign policy, whilst complementing and bolstering the work of its frontbench team.

www.newdiplomacy.uk

@NewDiplomacyUK