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Democratic Backsliding as a NTS Challenge: India's Nationalism and the Changing Dynamics of Power in the Indo-Pacific

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Introduction

In recent years, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a central arena of geopolitical contestation, where traditional security concerns increasingly intersect with a wide range of non-traditional security (NTS) challenges, including governance failures, economic inequality, social fragmentation, and information disorder. While much of the existing literature has focused on military competition and strategic rivalry, comparatively less attention has been paid to how domestic political transformations within key regional actors reshape the contours of non-traditional security. Existing literature studies democratic backsliding and India's foreign policy separately but does not explain how domestic democratic erosion shapes non-traditional security and regional stability. This gap is particularly significant in the case of India, a rising power whose expanding regional role coincides with profound internal political change. This article addresses this

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gap by advancing a central puzzle: if India continues to function as an electoral democracy and a key regional actor, how do internal processes of democratic erosion translate into broader security outcomes beyond the military sphere? More specifically, how does democratic backsliding reshape governance capacity, social cohesion, and information environments in ways that generate non-traditional security risks and alter regional stability?

To answer this question, the article argues that democratic backsliding in India should be understood not simply as a domestic political development but as a structural non-traditional security challenge. Rather than representing a binary shift from democracy to authoritarianism, India's political trajectory reflects a process of transformation in which formal democratic continuity coexists with substantive institutional erosion. This transformation, driven by populism, majoritarian nationalism, and executive centralization, reconfigures the relationship between state, society, and governance, producing new forms of vulnerability.

The broader literature on democratic backsliding has shown that democratic erosion often proceeds through gradual institutional weakening, executive aggrandizement, constraints on opposition, and declining civil liberties rather than abrupt regime collapse. Yet this literature has been less attentive to the security implications of such processes beyond conventional concerns with regime type or domestic political order. This article extends that scholarship by arguing that democratic backsliding in India also constitutes a non-traditional security challenge. It does so not because democracy automatically guarantees equality or stability, but because the erosion of democratic accountability can intensify existing social inequalities, weaken governance capacity, distort information environments, and reduce the state's ability to manage complex societal and regional risks.

By foregrounding the intersection of democratic change and non-traditional security, this study challenges the tendency to treat domestic politics and security as analytically distinct domains. Instead, it argues that the stability and effectiveness of democratic governance are central to understanding contemporary security challenges.

The Indian case illustrates that democratic backsliding is not only a question of regime type but also a structural process with profound implications for governance, social cohesion, and regional stability._This article conceptualizes these dynamics as a cumulative causal process in which democratic backsliding contributes to institutional erosion, which in turn undermines governance capacity, intensifies social fragmentation, and encourages a more assertive foreign policy posture, ultimately generating regional instability. By linking domestic political transformation to both non-traditional and traditional security outcomes, the analysis highlights how internal changes within the state can reshape the broader strategic environment.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework, drawing on scholarship on democratic quality, populism, and political economy to conceptualize the relationship between domestic political transformation and non-traditional security. Section 3 examines the case of India, analyzing patterns of institutional erosion, electoral transformation, civil society change, and social inequality. Section 4 explores the implications of these developments for governance and state capacity as well as regional security. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of these findings for understanding the relationship between democracy, power, and security in the Indo-Pacific.

Theoretical Framework: Democracy, Populism, and Security

While the literature on democratic backsliding has primarily focused on institutional degradation, executive concentration of power, and declining democratic quality, this article extends that discussion by examining how such processes also generate non-traditional security vulnerabilities. Democracy should not be treated as inherently synonymous with equality or inclusion. Rather, democratic quality affects the extent to which institutions can mediate conflict, represent social demands, and respond to inequality through accountable governance. Understanding the relationship between democratic backsliding and NTS requires a framework that conceptualizes democracy as a multidimensional and evolving system. Recent scholarship conceptualizes democracy as a matter of degree, characterized by variation across multiple dimensions, including

rule of law, political participation, competition, and institutional accountability.[2] This approach is particularly useful in analyzing contemporary India, where democratic institutions formally persist but exhibit varying levels of effectiveness and constraint. This perspective is further reinforced by scholarship that emphasizes the uneven and layered nature of democratic practice in India. Rather than functioning as a single, uniform system, Indian democracy has long operated across multiple levels at the national, regional, and local scales, each characterized by distinct institutional dynamics and varying degrees of inclusiveness.[3] This multi-layered understanding allows for a more nuanced analysis of democratic backsliding, highlighting how erosion may occur unevenly across institutions and social groups.

The concept of democratic ambivalence is also critical in this context. This work suggests that democratic systems may simultaneously exhibit resilience and fragility, with formal continuity masking substantive transformation.[4] This duality is particularly relevant to India, where electoral processes remain intact even as institutional checks, civil liberties, and deliberative spaces face increasing constraints. While the quality of democracy framework captures variation, it does not fully explain the mechanisms driving democratic change. For this, scholarship on populism provides a crucial analytical lens. Populism is often understood as a political logic that constructs a moralized distinction between "the people" and "the elite," legitimizing centralized authority and weakening institutional constraints.[5] In the Indian context, populism

[2] Kyungmee Chung and Wonbin Cho, eds., *New Democracy and Autocratization in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2022).

[3] Arild Engelsen Ruud and Geir Heierstad, eds., *India's Democracies* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2016).

[4] Peter Ronald deSouza, Mohd. Sanjeer Alam, and Hilal Ahmed, eds., *Companion to Indian Democracy: Resilience, Fragility, Ambivalence* (London: Routledge, 2023).

[5] Deepak Nair, "Populists in the Shadow of Great Power Competition: Duterte, Sukarno, and Sihanouk in Comparative Perspective," *European Journal of International Relations* 29, no. 3 (2023): pp. 723–750.

operates not only as a political strategy but also as a structural force that reshapes governance and institutional behaviour.

Recent work on India highlights how populist politics contributes to the centralization of power and the erosion of democratic norms, particularly through the personalization of leadership and the marginalization of opposition voices. Populism operates not simply as a political style but as a governing logic that restructures institutions and consolidates executive authority. In the Indian context, populist mobilization enables leaders to bypass institutional constraints by appealing directly to the people, thereby weakening intermediary institutions and checks on power.[6] :The strongman leadership concept further reinforces these dynamics by leveraging crisis narratives and redistributive promises to legitimize centralized control.[7] These processes are complemented by the emergence of technocratic populism, in which claims to expertise are selectively deployed to justify political authority while maintaining anti-elite rhetoric, thereby reshaping relations between state and society.[8] At the electoral level, patronage networks and targeted welfare distribution play a crucial role in sustaining populist support, as clientelistic strategies reinforce loyalty while consolidating executive dominance.[9] In parallel, sector-specific policies, including those tied to identity and symbolic politics, are used to mobilize constituencies, discipline dissent, and embed majoritarian narratives within governance structures.[10] Taken together, these studies demonstrate that populism in India is not only a vehicle for

[6] Srikrishna Ayyangar, *A Logic of Populism: India and Its States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

[7] Deepanshu Mohan and Abhinav Padmanabhan, *Strongmen Saviours: A Political Economy of Populism in India, Turkey, Russia, and Brazil* (London: Routledge, 2024).

[8] Anuradha Sajjanhar, *The New Experts: Populist Elites and Technocratic Promises in Modi's India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[9] Paul D. Kenny, *Populism and Patronage: Why Populists Win Elections in India, Asia, and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[10] Jostein Jakobsen and Kenneth Bo Nielsen, *Authoritarian Populism and Bovine Political Economy in Modi's India*(London: Taylor & Francis, 2023).

electoral mobilization but also a mechanism for institutional transformation, closely linked to the rise of majoritarian nationalism that redefines the boundaries of political community and reshapes the relationship between state and society.

In this regard, Jaffrelot's concept of "ethnic democracy" offers a particularly powerful framework for understanding India's transformation.[11] Ethnic democracy retains formal democratic institutions while privileging a dominant majority group and systematically marginalizing minorities. This framework moves beyond the notion of simple backsliding to capture a more profound reconfiguration of democratic governance, in which institutional structures are repurposed to serve ideological and majoritarian objectives. Importantly, populism also operates through discursive mechanisms. Political communication and electoral narratives play a central role in constructing legitimacy and shaping public perception.[12] These narratives often emphasize strong leadership, national identity, and development, while obscuring underlying processes of institutional erosion. The transformation of the information environment, including the weakening of deliberative processes and the rise of polarized discourse, further reinforces these dynamics.[13]

A comprehensive understanding of democratic backsliding must also account for its material and institutional consequences. Political economy approaches highlight how democratic governance is closely linked to state capacity, resource distribution, and economic inequality.[14] In this framework, democracy is not only a political system but

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[11] Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, trans. Cynthia Schoch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

[12] Yatindra Singh Sisodia and Pratip Chattopadhyay, eds., *Political Communication in Contemporary India: Locating Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2022).

[13] Teresa Joseph and Siby K. Joseph, *Deliberative Democracy: Understanding the Indian Experience* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[14] Nikhil Menon, *Planning Democracy: Modern India's Quest for Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

also a mechanism for managing development, ensuring accountability, and delivering public goods. In the Indian context, persistent inequality and uneven development reveal structural limitations in democratic governance.[15] These limitations are exacerbated by the erosion of institutional accountability, which weakens the state's ability to respond effectively to social and economic challenges. Corruption, in particular, emerges as a critical mechanism through which democratic norms and governance outcomes are interconnected.[16] The weakening of accountability structures not only undermines institutional legitimacy but also reduces the effectiveness of policy implementation. At the same time, the relationship between democracy and governance extends to the local level. Decentralized governance has historically played a key role in enabling participation and improving service delivery, yet its effectiveness remains uneven.[17] The centralization of political authority under conditions of democratic backsliding further constrains local governance capacity, limiting the state's ability to address complex and localized challenges.

Integrating these perspectives allows for the development of a comprehensive framework linking democratic backsliding to non-traditional security. The central argument of this article is that democratic erosion generates NTS risks through three interconnected mechanisms: (1) Institutional erosion and governance failure, (2) Social inequality and polarization, and (3) discursive transformation and information disorder. These mechanisms are mutually reinforcing and operate across multiple levels of governance. Together, they produce a range of non-traditional security challenges, including reduced resilience to economic shocks, increased vulnerability to social

[15] Atul Kohli and Kanta Murali, *Democracy and Inequality in India: Political Economy of a Troubled Giant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026).

[16] Bilal A. Baloch, *When Ideas Matter: Democracy and Corruption in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[17] M. V. Nadkarni, N. Sivanna, and Lavanya Suresh, *Decentralised Democracy in India: Gandhi's Vision and Indian Reality*(London: Routledge, 2018).

conflict, and weakened capacity to address transnational issues such as climate change and public health crises.

By integrating insights from the literature on democratic quality, populism, and political economy, this framework advances a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between democracy and security. It moves beyond state-centric and militarized conceptions of security to highlight the central role of governance, social cohesion, and institutional capacity in shaping security outcomes. In doing so, the framework also addresses a key gap in the literature by linking domestic political transformation to broader regional and global dynamics. As emerging powers such as India play an increasingly prominent role in the Indo-Pacific, their internal political trajectories have direct implications for regional stability and cooperation. Democratic backsliding, therefore, must be understood not only as a domestic political phenomenon but also as a structural factor shaping the evolving landscape of non-traditional security.

This argument does not assume that democracies are inherently peaceful, socially cohesive, or equitable, or that democratic governance automatically generates effective responses to nontraditional security threats. Democratic institutions may reproduce structural inequalities, privilege dominant groups, and fail to provide public goods equitably. Nor are authoritarian governments necessarily incapable of delivering effective policies in particular sectors. The narrower claim advanced here is that institutional accountability, inclusive participation, civil liberties, access to reliable information, and meaningful opportunities to contest state policy constitute important components of societal resilience. When backsliding selectively weakens these capacities, especially in a context already characterized by deep social inequalities, it can intensify existing vulnerabilities and impede collective responses to NTS challenges.

Democratic Backsliding in India

Building on the theoretical framework, this section examines how democratic backsliding in India manifests across institutional, political, and societal domains. Rather than representing a sudden rupture, India's trajectory reflects a gradual and uneven transformation in which formal democratic structures persist while their substantive

functioning is increasingly constrained. This pattern aligns with broader scholarship on democratic erosion, which emphasizes incremental change, executive aggrandizement, and the weakening of institutional checks rather than outright regime collapse.[18] External assessments reinforce this characterization, with Freedom House classifying India as "Partly Free," citing declines in political rights and civil liberties, particularly in relation to media freedom, minority rights, and institutional independence. [19] These developments are not only politically significant but also have implications for governance capacity and the state's ability to respond to complex non-traditional security challenges.

India has long been regarded as the world's largest democracy, characterized by competitive elections, constitutional governance, and a diverse political society. Yet recent scholarship increasingly highlights a more complex and ambivalent trajectory. As emphasized in recent scholarship, Indian democracy today is best understood through the interplay of resilience, fragility, and ambivalence, where formal institutional continuity coexists with substantive erosion. [20] Earlier work also reminds us that democracies often endure crises and adapt rather than collapse outright. As David Runciman argues, democratic systems can appear vulnerable in the short term yet demonstrate long-term resilience.[21] However, the Indian case raises important questions about the limits of such resilience, particularly when institutional erosion becomes gradual, normalized, and politically instrumentalized.

A growing body of research suggests that India is undergoing not merely democratic backsliding but a deeper transformation of its political order. In particular,

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[18] Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, 1 (2016): pp. 5–19.

[19] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024: India* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2024).

[20] Peter Ronald deSouza, Mohd. Sanjeer Alam, and Hilal Ahmed, eds., *Companion to Indian Democracy: Resilience, Fragility, Ambivalence* (London: Routledge, 2023).

[21] David Runciman, *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Christophe Jaffrelot conceptualizes this shift as the emergence of an "ethnic democracy," in which formal democratic institutions persist but are increasingly shaped by majoritarian nationalism and the systematic marginalization of minority groups.[22] Complementing this perspective, recent analyses point to patterns of executive centralization, weakening institutional checks, and constraints on dissent that collectively signal a reconfiguration rather than a collapse of democracy.[23] These developments are further reinforced by arguments that democratic institutions are increasingly hollowed out in practice, even as they remain formally intact.[24] Together, these works suggest that India's political trajectory is best understood as a process of hybridization and transformation rather than a simple shift from democracy to authoritarianism.

Despite the richness of this literature, the security implications of democratic backsliding remain underexplored. This article argues that democratic erosion in India constitutes a critical non-traditional security challenge rather than merely a domestic political phenomenon. Democratic backsliding reshapes governance capacity, undermines institutional accountability, and intensifies social divisions, thereby generating new forms of insecurity. As political economy scholarship demonstrates, persistent inequality and uneven development further compound these dynamics by weakening the state's ability to deliver public goods and respond effectively to societal needs.[25] Similarly, the erosion of accountability mechanisms and governance norms, particularly in relation to corruption, reduces institutional effectiveness and exacerbates

[22] Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, trans. Cynthia Schoch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

[23] Dinsha Mistree and Sumit Ganguly, *Troubling State of India's Democracy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024).

[24] Debasish Roy Chowdhury and John Keane, *To Kill a Democracy: India's Passage to Despotism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[25] Atul Kohli and Kanta Murali, *Democracy and Inequality in India: Political Economy of a Troubled Giant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026).

vulnerabilities across multiple sectors.[26] In the Indian case, democratic backsliding deepens these unevennesses by weakening accountability and narrowing protections for marginalized groups. In this sense, democratic decline has direct implications for human security, societal stability, and state resilience.

Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond institutional analysis to consider the broader social and political foundations of democracy. Scholarship on caste, inequality, and participation underscores that democracy in India has always been unevenly experienced across different social groups.[27] The expansion of political participation through caste-based mobilization, particularly among Other Backward Classes, historically deepened democratic inclusion, yet these gains remain uneven and contested.[28] At the same time, other studies highlight how marginalized groups actively negotiate access to state resources and political representation, revealing democracy as a lived and contested process rather than a purely institutional arrangement.[29] Similarly, work on citizenship and participation in agrarian contexts emphasizes how democratic engagement is embedded in everyday interactions between citizens and the state.[30] These perspectives are critical for understanding the implications of democratic backsliding, as institutional erosion interacts with existing social inequalities to deepen marginalization and vulnerability.

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[26] Bilal A. Baloch, *When Ideas Matter: Democracy and Corruption in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[27] Jagpal Singh, *Caste, State and Society: Degrees of Democracy in North India* (London: Routledge, 2022).

[28] Satendra Kumar, *Popular Democracy and the Politics of Caste: Rise of the Other Backward Classes in India* (London: Routledge, 2024).

[29] Indrajit Roy, *Politics of the Poor: Negotiating Democracy in Contemporary India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[30] Mukulika Banerjee, *Cultivating Democracy: Politics and Citizenship in Agrarian India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

Contemporary political change in India is also closely linked to the rise of populism and the transformation of political discourse. Building on the work of Deepak Nair, populism can be understood as a political strategy embedded within broader structural and geopolitical contexts, shaping both domestic governance and external behaviour.[31] Complementing this perspective, recent scholarship on India highlights how populism operates through distinct political logics that reinforce centralization of power and reshape institutional constraints.[32] The role of political communication and electoral discourse is central to this process. Narratives of governance, development, and national identity play a critical role in shaping public perception and legitimizing political authority.[33] These narratives often coexist with underlying processes of institutional erosion.[34] At the same time, the weakening of deliberative processes and the shrinking space for public debate contribute to polarization and undermine democratic accountability.[35]

Taken together, these developments point to a broader transformation in the relationship between democracy, governance, and security. This article advances a framework that links democratic backsliding to non-traditional security outcomes through three interconnected mechanisms: the erosion of institutional capacity and accountability, the intensification of social inequality and polarization, and the transformation of political discourse and information environments. The article

[31] Deepak Nair, "Populists in the Shadow of Great Power Competition: Duterte, Sukarno, and Sihanouk in Comparative Perspective," *European Journal of International Relations* 29, no. 3 (2023): pp. 723–750.

[32] Srikrishna Ayyangar, *A Logic of Populism: India and Its States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

[33] Yatindra Singh Sisodia and Pratip Chattopadhyay, eds., *Political Communication in Contemporary India: Locating Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2022).

[34] Yatindra Singh Sisodia and Pratip Chattopadhyay, eds., *Electoral Narratives of Democracy and Governance in India* (London: Routledge, 2024).

[35] Teresa Joseph and Siby K. Joseph, *Deliberative Democracy: Understanding the Indian Experience* (London: Routledge, 2018).

demonstrates that democratic backsliding is not only a political phenomenon but also a structural process with far-reaching implications for governance and security.

A central feature of democratic backsliding in India is the weakening of institutional checks and balances. While constitutional structures remain formally intact, their capacity to constrain executive authority has diminished. Power has become increasingly concentrated within the executive, accompanied by a decline in the autonomy of institutions such as the judiciary, parliament, and regulatory bodies.[36] Mechanisms designed to ensure oversight, including parliamentary debate and judicial review, have become less effective in constraining executive action. These institutional changes directly constrain the state's ability to manage non-traditional security challenges, particularly in areas such as public health response, climate governance, and economic crisis management, where coordination, accountability, and institutional autonomy are essential. This shift reflects a broader transformation in governance, where institutional procedures are preserved, but their substantive independence is eroded. The consequences extend beyond formal politics, as weakened institutional accountability reduces policy transparency, limits corrective mechanisms, and undermines effective decision-making. In the context of non-traditional security, these dynamics constrain the state's ability to respond to crises, manage risks, and maintain public trust.

Despite these institutional changes, electoral democracy remains formally intact. Elections continue to be held regularly, with high levels of voter participation and public engagement. However, the quality of political competition has undergone significant transformation. The consolidation of political power has produced an increasingly asymmetrical political landscape in which opposition parties face structural and organizational disadvantages. Disparities in campaign resources, media access, and institutional support contribute to an uneven playing field, raising questions about the

[36] Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

fairness and inclusiveness of competition.[37] At the same time, electoral politics is increasingly shaped by narratives emphasizing nationalism, development, and strong leadership. These narratives not only influence voter preferences but also legitimize centralized authority and blur the distinction between democratic competition and ideological mobilization. As a result, elections function not only as mechanisms of representation but also as instruments of political consolidation, with implications for democratic accountability and policy responsiveness.

The transformation of Indian democracy is also evident in changes to civil society and patterns of political participation. While civil society has traditionally been viewed as a pillar of democratic resilience, recent developments reveal a more complex relationship. The space for independent civil society engagement has become increasingly constrained, particularly for organizations that challenge state policies or advocate for minority rights.[38] At the same time, segments of civil society aligned with dominant political narratives have gained prominence, reshaping public discourse and political mobilization. These shifts contribute to a more polarized and fragmented public sphere, limiting deliberation and reducing the diversity of political voices. Nevertheless, participation remains a defining feature of Indian democracy. Marginalized groups continue to engage with the state through localized and informal practices of negotiation and contestation, indicating that democratic agency persists even under conditions of institutional constraint.[39] However, the coexistence of constrained formal participation and active informal engagement reflects a transformation rather than a disappearance of democratic practice, with important implications for societal resilience.

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[37] Srikrishna Ayyangar, *A Logic of Populism: India and Its States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

[38] Anuradha Sajjanhar, *The New Experts: Populist Elites and Technocratic Promises in Modi's India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[39] Indrajit Roy, *Politics of the Poor: Negotiating Democracy in Contemporary India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Democratic backsliding in India must also be understood in relation to its social foundations, particularly the role of caste, class, and identity. Indian democracy has historically been shaped by deep social hierarchies that influence access to political power and state resources. The expansion of political participation through caste-based mobilization represented an important deepening of democratic inclusion.[40] However, these gains have been uneven and remain subject to ongoing contestation. Contemporary political developments have further complicated this landscape through the rise of majoritarian nationalism, which redefines the boundaries of political community and privileges certain identities while marginalizing others.[41] These dynamics produce differentiated experiences of democracy, where institutional erosion interacts with existing inequalities to amplify vulnerability among marginalized groups. In this sense, democratic backsliding is not uniform but socially uneven, with direct implications for inclusion, representation, and access to state protection.

Finally, the transformation of Indian democracy has significant implications for governance and state capacity. Democratic institutions play a critical role in shaping policy outcomes, ensuring accountability, and enabling the effective delivery of public goods. As these institutions weaken, the capacity of the state to manage complex social and economic challenges is increasingly constrained. Persistent inequality and uneven development continue to shape governance outcomes, while the erosion of accountability mechanisms reduces policy effectiveness and increases the risk of corruption.[42] At the same time, the centralization of political authority affects local governance, where decentralized institutions are essential for service delivery and community engagement. The weakening of these institutions limits the state's ability to respond to localized

[40] Satendra Kumar, *Popular Democracy and the Politics of Caste: Rise of the Other Backward Classes in India* (London: Routledge, 2024).

[41] Debasish Roy Chowdhury and John Keane, *To Kill a Democracy: India's Passage to Despotism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[42] Atul Kohli and Kanta Murali, *Democracy and Inequality in India: Political Economy of a Troubled Giant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026).

challenges, exacerbating governance gaps. Taken together, these developments underscore the interconnected nature of democratic backsliding, governance, and non-traditional security. Institutional erosion, political centralization, and social inequality are mutually reinforcing processes that reshape the functioning of democracy and reduce the state's capacity to address emerging and complex security challenges. This article does not assume that democracy in India has historically produced equal inclusion or protection across social groups; rather, it argues that democratic backsliding further weakens already uneven structures of accountability, representation, and access to state protection.

From Democratic Backsliding to Non-Traditional Security and Regional Security Outcomes

This section advances the central claim of the article: democratic backsliding in India generates non-traditional security risks not only within domestic governance and society but also through its spillover effects on regional security dynamics. Rather than treating security as confined to military threats, this analysis demonstrates how domestic political transformations reshape governance capacity, social cohesion, the information environment, and external strategic behaviour. In particular, India's democratic recession under Modi is closely linked to the rise of a more nationalist and assertive foreign policy, with direct implications for regional stability. Building on the theoretical framework, the section identifies four interrelated pathways through which democratic erosion translates into security challenges: governance erosion, social inequality and polarization, information disorder, and regional crisis dynamics.

A primary mechanism linking democratic backsliding to non-traditional security outcomes is the erosion of governance capacity. Democratic institutions play a central role in ensuring accountability, transparency, and effective policy implementation. As these institutions weaken, the state's ability to respond to complex challenges such as public health crises, climate risks, and economic instability is significantly constrained. Empirical evidence from crisis situations, including the COVID-19 pandemic, highlights coordination failures, resource shortages, and inconsistencies in policy implementation

that reflect broader institutional weaknesses. Analyses of India's pandemic response further demonstrate how governance challenges were shaped not only by administrative constraints but also by political narratives and centralized decision-making processes that influenced crisis management strategies.[43] These governance deficits reduce state effectiveness and undermine public trust, both of which are critical for managing non-traditional security threats.

A second pathway operates through social inequality and polarization. Indian democracy has long been shaped by deep social hierarchies, but recent political developments have intensified divisions along religious, caste, and ideological lines. The rise of majoritarian nationalism has redefined the boundaries of political community, privileging certain identities while marginalizing others, thereby deepening political polarization and social fragmentation.[44] These dynamics are further reinforced through contemporary communication environments, where digital platforms and messaging networks amplify partisan narratives and affective divisions, contributing to the intensification of polarization at both elite and mass levels.[45] At the same time, polarization is not only ideological but also embedded in structural inequalities, as uneven economic development and persistent disparities across regions and social groups reinforce patterns of exclusion and contestation.[46] These dynamics directly affect human security by increasing vulnerability among minority populations and limiting access to resources, justice, and political representation. As political and religious identities become more salient in shaping public discourse, marginalized groups face heightened risks of discrimination, exclusion, and social violence. At the same time,

[43] Rahul Ranjan, *Governing the Crisis: Narratives of COVID-19 in India* (London: Routledge, 2025).

[44] Niranjan Sahoo, "Hindu Nationalism and Political Polarization in India," in *Democracies Divided*, ed. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019).

[45] Anindita Borah and Sanasam Ranbir Singh, "Investigating Political Polarization in India through the Lens of Twitter," *Social Network Analysis and Mining* 12, 1 (2022): p. 97.

[46] Sanghamitra Bandyopadhyay, "Rich States, Poor States: Convergence and Polarisation in India," *Scottish Journal of Political Economy* 58, 3 (2011): pp. 414–36.

polarization weakens social cohesion, a critical component of societal resilience. Fragmented societies face greater difficulty in coordinating responses to crises, thereby amplifying the impact of non-traditional security threats. In this context, polarization operates not only as a political phenomenon but also as a structural driver of insecurity, undermining the collective capacity of society to respond to complex challenges.

A third mechanism linking democratic backsliding to non-traditional security outcomes is the transformation of the information environment. The rise of populist politics has been accompanied by shifts in political communication, media structures, and public discourse. Nationalist narratives centred on sovereignty and strong leadership increasingly shape political legitimacy, while constraints on independent media and the proliferation of digital platforms facilitate the spread of misinformation. Empirical research demonstrates that the reception of misinformation in India is deeply shaped by identity-based factors, including religious affiliation, which significantly influences the likelihood of accepting false or misleading claims.[47] At the same time, exposure to misinformation and politically charged narratives has been shown to alter intergroup attitudes, reinforcing divisions and heightening mistrust across social groups.[48] Affective polarization further intensifies these dynamics by reinforcing the acceptance of identity-consistent misinformation, thereby undermining the quality of public debate and weakening evidence-based policymaking. These dynamics have direct implications for non-traditional security, as misinformation affects public compliance during crises, contributes to social unrest, and limits the effectiveness of coordinated responses.

These domestic transformations do not remain confined within national boundaries but spill over into regional security dynamics. The implications of democratic backsliding are most visible in the domain of crisis behavior, particularly in India's relations with Pakistan and China. India-Pakistan rivalry continues to reflect the paradox

[47] Simon Chauchard and Sumitra Badrinathan, "The Religious Roots of Belief in Misinformation: Experimental Evidence from India," *British Journal of Political Science* (2025).

[48] Ursula Daxecker, Hanne Fjelde, and Neeraj Prasad, "Misinformation, Narratives, and Intergroup Attitudes: Evidence from India," *The Journal of Politics* 87, 2 (2025): pp. 757–73.

of nuclear deterrence, where the presence of nuclear weapons reduces the likelihood of full-scale war while enabling limited conflict and recurring crises.[49] These dynamics are further complicated by non-state actors and sub-conventional warfare, which create pathways for escalation that are difficult to control.[50] The 2019 Pulwama–Balakot crisis illustrates this pattern, marking a shift toward more overt and rapid escalation while remaining below the threshold of full-scale war.[51] At the same time, crisis behaviour remains shaped by mechanisms of signalling and reassurance that aim to prevent uncontrolled escalation. [52] However, the growing influence of domestic political incentives and nationalist mobilization may weaken these stabilizing mechanisms by increasing pressure for visible and decisive responses. As a result, crisis interactions are increasingly influenced not only by strategic considerations but also by internal political dynamics.

A critical dimension of this shift is the growing role of nationalist political narratives and leadership style in shaping public expectations. Under Modi, foreign policy has increasingly been framed through themes of national strength, sovereignty, and decisive leadership, reinforcing a political image of the state as assertive and uncompromising in the face of external threats. This style of political communication does not simply reflect strategic choices but actively shapes public opinion by raising expectations that the government will respond forcefully to perceived provocations from Pakistan and China. In highly charged domestic environments, electoral incentives and media amplification further reinforce these expectations, creating a political context in which restraint may be interpreted as weakness. As a result, policymakers face increasing

[49] Sumit Ganguly and Devin T. Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry: India-Pakistan Crises in the Shadow of Nuclear Weapons* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2024).

[50] Muhammad Sadiq and Iftikhar Ali, "Non-State Actors, Sub-Conventional Warfare, and India-Pakistan Nuclear Crisis Stability/Instability," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 59, 2 (2024): pp. 325–37.

[51] Ashley J. Tellis, "Crisis and Escalation in South Asia," Carnegie Endowment, 2019.

[52] Karthika Sasikumar, "India-Pakistan Crises under the Nuclear Shadow: The Role of Reassurance," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 2, 1 (2019): pp. 151–69.

pressure to adopt visible and assertive responses during crises, even when such actions carry significant risks of escalation. This dynamic is particularly concerning in the context of nuclearized rivalries. When public expectations are aligned with nationalist narratives of strength and retaliation, the space for calibrated responses and de-escalation may narrow. Leaders may find it politically costly to signal restraint, especially during moments of heightened public attention and mobilization. In such conditions, crisis decision-making becomes more tightly coupled to domestic political considerations, increasing the risk that tactical actions undertaken for signalling purposes could trigger unintended escalation. The danger is not necessarily deliberate escalation to large-scale conflict, but rather miscalculation arising from rapid decision-making under political pressure, which in a nuclear environment carries potentially catastrophic consequences.

India-China tensions further demonstrate how domestic transformation interacts with structural rivalry to produce regional instability. Border disputes along the Line of Actual Control are part of a broader pattern of recurring standoffs and crisis episodes that reflect long-term strategic competition.[53] The 2020 Galwan Valley clashes represent a significant escalation within this pattern, highlighting the shift toward more sustained confrontation. Importantly, these crises are shaped by interactive decision-making processes on both sides. Analyses of Chinese crisis behaviour emphasize the role of civil–military dynamics in shaping responses, indicating that escalation outcomes are contingent and reciprocal rather than unilateral.[54] In this context, assertive posturing by one side can trigger reactive escalation by the other, reinforcing a cycle of confrontation that is difficult to control.

Taken together, these developments underscore that regional crises in South Asia are embedded in a complex interaction between domestic political change and structural

[53] Raj Verma, "India-China Rivalry, Border Dispute, Border Standoffs, and Crises," *India Review* 23, 5 (2024): pp. 397–408.

[54] Jaganath Sankaran, "State or Soldier? Explaining China's Decisionmaking in India-China Border Crises," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 46, 6–7 (2023): pp. 1215–44.

strategic conditions. In India's case, democratic backsliding has contributed to the centralization of decision-making, the rise of nationalist narratives, and the increasing use of foreign policy as a tool of domestic political legitimation. These factors reinforce a more assertive and risk-accepting external posture while interacting with enduring strategic constraints and adversarial responses. The implications for non-traditional security are significant. Governance erosion, social fragmentation, and information disorder reduce the state's capacity to manage internal vulnerabilities, while more assertive foreign policy behaviour increases the likelihood of external crises. These processes are mutually reinforcing. Internal instability can incentivize external assertiveness, while external tensions can further deepen domestic polarization. As a result, democratic backsliding produces a feedback loop that links domestic governance challenges with regional security instability.

The implications extend beyond South Asia to the broader Indo-Pacific security environment. India is widely viewed as a central pillar in regional balancing strategies and multilateral frameworks aimed at maintaining stability in the face of rising geopolitical competition. However, domestic political transformation may affect both the consistency and predictability of India's external engagement. A more nationalist and domestically driven foreign policy can complicate coordination with regional partners, particularly in areas that require sustained cooperation such as maritime security, crisis management, and responses to transnational challenges. At the same time, heightened tensions with China and persistent crises with Pakistan contribute to an increasingly volatile regional environment, where localized confrontations have the potential to generate wider strategic repercussions. In this context, India's internal political trajectory becomes a critical variable shaping not only bilateral disputes but also the broader architecture of Indo Pacific security.

This analysis demonstrates that democratic governance is a critical component of both non-traditional and traditional security. The erosion of democratic institutions in India not only undermines internal resilience but also reshapes regional security dynamics by increasing the frequency and intensity of crises. Understanding these linkages is essential for assessing the stability of the South Asian and Indo Pacific regions,

where domestic political transformations increasingly shape the broader strategic environment.

Conclusion

This article has argued that democratic backsliding in India should be understood not simply as a domestic political development, but as a structural non-traditional security challenge with far-reaching implications for governance, society, and regional order. Moving beyond binary classifications of regime type, the analysis has shown that India's political trajectory reflects a complex process of transformation in which formal democratic continuity coexists with substantive institutional erosion. This transformation, driven by the rise of populism, majoritarian nationalism, and executive centralization, has fundamentally reconfigured the relationship between state, society, and governance in ways that generate new forms of insecurity.

The article's central contribution lies in identifying three interconnected pathways through which democratic backsliding translates into non-traditional security outcomes. First, the erosion of institutional capacity and accountability constrains governance effectiveness, limiting the state's ability to respond to complex challenges such as economic inequality, climate change, and public health crises. Second, the intensification of social inequality and polarization increases vulnerability among marginalized groups while weakening social cohesion, thereby undermining societal resilience. Third, the transformation of the information environment, characterized by the proliferation of populist narratives, media constraints, and declining deliberative quality, distorts decision-making processes and amplifies divisions within society. Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that democratic backsliding is not a discrete political event but a cumulative and self-reinforcing process that reshapes the foundations of security. Governance failures exacerbate inequality, inequality deepens polarization, and polarization is further intensified through information disorder. This interaction generates a feedback loop that entrenches instability and reduces the capacity of both state and society to respond effectively to emerging challenges.

The Indian case also highlights the importance of linking domestic political transformation to regional security outcomes. As a major actor in the Indo-Pacific, India's internal political dynamics increasingly shape its external behaviour and its role in regional governance. Governance constraints, social fragmentation, and shifting political priorities may limit India's ability to engage consistently in multilateral cooperation, manage transnational risks, and contribute to collective security frameworks. At the same time, the growing prominence of nationalist narratives and centralized decision-making has been associated with a more assertive foreign policy posture, raising the potential for heightened regional tensions and crisis instability. More broadly, the findings contribute to ongoing debates on the relationship between democracy and security by demonstrating that democratic governance is a foundational component of non-traditional security. The erosion of democratic institutions affects more than representation and regime classification. Under the conditions examined in India, it can weaken the capacity of state institutions and social actors to identify risks, correct policy failures, coordinate responses to crises, and protect vulnerable communities.

This analysis also points to important directions for future research. It underscores the need for greater integration between comparative politics and security studies, particularly in examining how institutional, social, and discursive transformations interact to produce complex security outcomes. It also highlights the importance of moving beyond state-centric approaches to consider the broader societal processes that shape resilience and vulnerability in contemporary political systems. In conclusion, democratic backsliding in India represents a multidimensional transformation with direct implications for non-traditional security at both domestic and regional levels. By linking institutional erosion, social fragmentation, and information disorder to broader patterns of insecurity, this article demonstrates that democracy and security are deeply interconnected. Recognizing this relationship is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of security in an era defined by political transformation, contested governance, and evolving regional dynamics.

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