India as a Democratic Tech Power in the Liberal International Order

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Introduction

India stands at a crossroads for the future of the global technology order. As the world's most populous democracy and one of its fastest-growing economies, India has the demographic scale, institutional experience, and international ambition to shape how the next generation of digital systems is governed. How it exercises that influence will have lasting consequences for the Global South and for democratic norms as technological change accelerates and the international order evolves.

Recent years have seen India invest in tech diplomacy—pursuing new international partnerships, convening global dialogues and information-sharing mechanisms, sharing its digital public infrastructure model with Global South countries, and investing in capacity-building and technical assistance programs. Those efforts build on India's domestic push to advance economic development through technologies that are subject to accountable governance as well as affordable for lower-income groups.

Artificial intelligence (AI), is a telling example. India's recent AI Governance Guidelines (2026) set out seven principles to pursue "democratization, scale, and inclusion," and to "ensure that AI is not concentrated in a handful of firms or geographies."[1] This reflects New Delhi's deeper concern that new technologies are being deployed to freeze the current geopolitical order and deny it and other rising powers space to grow. It also signals India's interest in developing new international cooperation frameworks to ensure that AI and other technologies remain a global public good.

Unlike its mostly defensive past stances on trade or climate negotiations, India's approach to technology is proactive, seeking a leading role. India has the ambition to leverage its unique normative, demographic, and market power to expand its global influence and shape a more democratic tech order, but domestic limitations could constrain its reach. In any case, India cannot steward a democratic technology order alone—not globally, not regionally, and arguably not even within the Global South. Effective progress toward democratic technology governance will require India to work in concert with like-minded democratic powers willing to coordinate on shared frameworks, pool institutional resources, and present a coherent alternative to China's authoritarian state-led model.

The role of the United States will be especially important: New Delhi's efforts will have limited impact without Washington's continued investment in democratic coalition-building, such as the Quad (the informal quadrilateral security dialogue among India, Australia, Japan, and the United States); in institutional capacity-building across the Global South; or in multilateral principles on AI regulation and data governance that put citizens first. It is unlikely that President Trump shares any of these priorities, which portends a more narrow US-India partnership, focused more on India as a tech market rather than on India as a normative co-producer of a democratic tech order.

Governing Technology at Home in India

To understand how India could shape the emerging global technology order, it is imperative to consider its domestic experience governing technological change, which has been markedly shaped by its democratic trajectory since 1947.[2] Recent assessments point to growing fault lines in Indian democracy, prompting a vibrant discussion about rule of law, civic rights, and religious majoritarianism.[3]

Yet despite questions about whether Indian democracy is backsliding, stagnating, or progressing, its regulatory record suggests that, in technology at least, India's approach remains much closer to that of its democratic peers than to China, Russia, or other autocracies. In spite of its challenges and flaws, India's tech governance remains categorically democratic in terms of the rule of law, legislative deliberation, and civil society and private sector participation.

Those dynamics make India's tech policy distinctly pluralistic, often messier and slower than authoritarian models, yet more responsive to diverse stakeholder pressures. They also reflect India's powerful bureaucracy's preference for Western tech governance models: after 2017, as Indian civil servants sought inspiration abroad for a digital privacy model, they instinctively engaged Washington and Brussels, but not Beijing or Moscow.[4] That orientation helped forge partnerships linking technology with trade, security, and defense, including the U.S.-India TRUST Initiative (formerly iCET), the EU-India Trade and Technology Council, and a new India-Japan economic security dialogue.

How Geopolitics Affects India's Democratic Alignment

Although several of India's domestic tech governance choices were developed democratically, they were not made in a vacuum, nor are they locked into the country's foreign policy. New Delhi's is closely monitoring the evolving U.S.-China geopolitical contest and weighing the risks and benefits of continued democratic alignment. Whether India enters the tech diplomacy playing arena depends on its assessments of three structural challenges affecting the global order.

The first is geoeconomic. Even though global integration has reached unprecedented levels across trade, capital, and supply chains, recent years have seen that interdependence is now being weaponized rather than deepened. India has felt this through U.S. President Donald Trump's tariff war and China's export restrictions on rare earths. Unlike past efforts on trade or climate, there is no realistic prospect of a global consensus producing binding treaties or multilateral institutions to regulate artificial intelligence (AI), cyberspace, digital infrastructure, or any other technology domain.

India used to complain of being excluded from the rooms where the rules of global governance were written. Today, there are no rooms to join, whether on cross-border data flows, semiconductor supply chains, or digital infrastructure. India views this multilateral vacuum with growing concern; a grand U.S.-China "G2" bargain on those issues would be New Delhi's worst nightmare.

The second structural challenge is political, especially for democratic countries like India. Populist movements are eroding democratic institutions and bureaucratic state capacity globally, undermining public trust in governments' capacity to regulate technology or hold major technology firms accountable. This vicious cycle creates a permissive environment for authoritarian-leaning approaches to tech governance, most prominently embodied in China's model of a technologically empowered surveillance state. New Delhi is watching this political space closely, both lured and concerned by the prospect of a Beijing consensus.

The third and most important challenge concerns the future of the international order, and specifically the role of the United States. As New Delhi's foremost strategic partner over the past twenty years, Washington has retreated from multilateral frameworks and signaled diminished commitment to democratic norms abroad. This U.S. withdrawal from normative leadership does not merely create a vacuum; it actively reshapes India's calculus on whether promoting democratic norms is a worthwhile investment or a strategic liability.

Beyond the United States, no significant alternative leader has stepped up to champion global norms on technology governance, for example the right to privacy. The European Union, long the world's most ambitious technology regulator, faces fiscal constraints, internal political fragmentation, and security challenges that have curtailed its capacity to project normative influence abroad. Other democratic middle powers—such as Australia, Canada, Japan, or the United Kingdom—remain committed technology partners, but none possesses India's scale, market weight, or geopolitical ambition to anchor a new coalition.

China, meanwhile, is moving in the opposite direction. Beijing is investing heavily in new international institutions, bilateral digital infrastructure partnerships, and normative frameworks that privilege state sovereignty over individual rights, redefine human rights to subordinate civil liberties to development and security, and promote state-led technology governance models centered on surveillance, data centralization, and political control. China already enjoys first-mover advantages in several technology domains in the Global South—including telecommunications infrastructure, digital payment systems, and smart city applications—and is actively converting those advantages into normative and institutional influence.[5]

The result is a fraught and fragmented international environment, with democratic powers on the back foot and multilateral institutions weak or absent. The stakes extend well beyond ideology. Firms and investors operating in tomorrow's high-growth digital economies will have to comply with regulatory frameworks, data governance standards, and interoperability agreements increasingly shaped by China. If democratic powers such as India miss this window of opportunity to shape standard-setting processes, they cede not only normative influence but also future economic returns and strategic leverage.

India's Potential as a Democratic Tech Power

In this turbulent environment, marked by the global order's uncertain transition and the leadership vacuum left by the United States, India occupies a unique position. It is the only rising democracy with both the strategic interest and the material capability to shape global technology norms at scale. Four attributes define its normative profile and underpin its potential as a democratic technology power.

First, India's democratic institutions—its representative institutions, independent judiciary, active civil society, and constitutionally enshrined rights—provide a foundation for its normative claims that authoritarian competitors cannot replicate or offer to the Global South. When India advocates for privacy protections, open internet architectures, or multistakeholder governance, it does so as a country that has, however imperfectly, developed its own technology policy through democratic processes and deliberation. For example, in a landmark 2017 ruling, the Supreme Court of India overruled the executive's attempts to implement a digital governance framework by declaring the right to privacy a fundamental constitutional right. That ruling constrained shaped how the government designed Aadhaar (the national biometric identification system) and, more importantly, provided the legal architecture for subsequent data governance legislation.[6]

In 2023, after multiple rounds of public consultation and parliamentary discussion over nearly six years—reflecting pressure from civil society, industry groups, and opposition parties who pushed

back against earlier, more restrictive drafts—India finally passed the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDA), establishing consent requirements for data processing and regulatory oversight mechanisms akin to those of the European Union.

Second, India's demographic dividend—a young population of nearly 1.5 billion and a rapidly expanding engineering and entrepreneurial class—gives the country enduring structural weight in the global innovation economy. India's technology talent is already deeply embedded in global industry and research; the question is whether New Delhi can leverage this workforce to develop its technological capabilities, for example, with an Indian large language model (LLM) that can compete with Chinese or American ones. This will require massive public and private investments to retain expert talent, harvest public data, and boost the country's meager research and development budgets.[7]

Third, India's market is an extraordinary prize for the global technology industry. Its expanding middle class, accelerating digital consumption, and vast untapped technological potential in finance, health, education, and agriculture make India an indispensable partner for firms and governments seeking to shape future digital commerce. The recent India-EU free trade agreement reflects the allure of India's market power for at least another two decades.

Fourth, India's internationalist ambition has grown markedly in recent years. Its Group of Twenty (G20) presidency, its leadership within the Global South, its hosting of the AI Impact Summit in 2026, and its active engagement in emerging technology coalitions all signal a country determined to shape the future of global technology governance. That ambition could also explain the contrasting moods in New Delhi and many democratic capitals: despite sharing overall pessimism and concerns about China, the United States, and the risk of great power conflict, Indian decision-makers often reflect a sentiment that "our time has come," and remain optimistic about the potential benefits of a new international order.[8]

For countries in the Global South, India thus holds much promise as a tech partner, distinct from other democratic players. Unlike the United States, India remains committed to multilateral institutions and international cooperation frameworks to ensure that technological progress fuels economic development, not inequality. And unlike Europe, India does not have a

history of exporting or imposing governance models, including through democratic norms, as conditionalities for aid.

Three Trajectories for Indian Democratic Tech Power

India's unique qualities are no guarantee that it will rise as a democratic tech leader. For many decades during the Cold War, India remained at the margins of the liberal international order, agnostic or even opposed to key agendas of the United States and other democracies.[9] Yet the country's identity as the world's largest multiparty democracy has nonetheless influenced its foreign policy. India has often preferred working with democratic counterparts and, at times, supported democratization efforts through economic inducements, capacity-building initiatives, or international initiatives such as the UN Democracy Fund and the Community of Democracies.[10]

Technology now offers the most consequential arena for assessing whether India's democratic identity and experience at home will, once again, shape Indian behavior abroad. The governance of emerging technologies strikes at the heart of the social contract between state, market, and citizen—determining how data is collected, stored, and shared; how artificial intelligence is trained and deployed; and who controls the digital infrastructure underpinning economic and civic life.

Three broad trajectories present themselves for India. In a democratic scenario, India assumes a leadership role alongside other open societies, championing transparent, accountable, and privacy-protective technology systems as global public goods. That would build norms that constrain surveillance, protect user rights, and ensure interoperability. In a second, agnostic scenario, India remains strategically nonaligned; negotiating hybrid regulatory frameworks, maintaining flexibility across competing blocs, and insulating itself from the ideological dimensions of the technology competition. Finally, in an authoritarian scenario, India aligns with China, Russia, and other proponents of state-led governance, subordinating privacy and transparency to security imperatives and to political—even partisan—control.

Which of those three trajectories prevails will depend on a confluence of domestic political choices and external incentives that remain in play. India's technology governance choices will not unfold in a vacuum. New Delhi is rethinking how to navigate a fragmented international environment in which the norms governing tomorrow's technologies are increasingly shaped by bilateral leverage, coalition-building, and competitive standard-setting rather than by consensus or principled multilateral deliberation. For the time being, India's default position remains firmly in the democratic camp, reflecting its domestic experience and ideological preference.

Experiments in Democratic Tech Diplomacy

New Delhi has emerged as a diplomatic frontrunner, normative experimenter, and institutional innovator in technology governance with a democratic orientation. As it matures its domestic systems, India has sought opportunities to share those systems abroad through international partnerships. Five modes of Indian tech diplomacy stand out.

- *Convening and information-sharing*: India's hosting of the AI Impact Summit in 2026 offered a forum to shape the global conversation on AI, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi calling for a focus on its democratization, accountability, and accessibility.[11] Similarly, during its 2023 G20 presidency, New Delhi helped develop a Global Digital Public Infrastructure Repository (GDPIR) for information-sharing.[12]
- *Public goods provision*: India's digital public infrastructure model is its most internationally visible contribution. The India Stack—comprising Aadhaar biometric identification, the Unified Payments Interface, and DigiLocker digital credential storage—has attracted interest across the Global South as a state-built alternative to both the private-sector model dominant in the United States and the surveillance-oriented state model advanced by China. Designed to enable access and inclusion without requiring users to surrender their data to a single corporate or government platform, it has been operationalized through India Stack Global partnerships and bilateral agreements with several countries, including Brazil, Singapore, and several African countries.[13]

- *Minilateral innovation and cooperation*: The Pax Silica semiconductor initiative and the Quad Critical and Emerging Technology working group—which has produced concrete cooperation on Open RAN telecommunications standards and quantum computing—reflect India's growing comfort with plurilateral technology coalitions led by or composed predominantly of democratic countries.[14] The Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) and the International Solar Alliance (ISA), both of which India cofounded, offer a template for how New Delhi can build minilateral institutions around shared technological interests, with a respective focus on solar energy and climate adaptation. Although the democratic alignment is less visible here, both the CDRI and ISA's organizational structures reflect India's commitment to treaty-based, intergovernmental, cooperative governance.[15]
- *Development partnerships*: India has one of the world's largest economic aid and capacity-building programs, which has focused on South-South and triangular technology partnerships to achieve development and climate goals.[16] Under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation program, for example, New Delhi has financed the training of thousands of officials from the Global South, including through programs focused on AI, digital public infrastructure, cybersecurity, and egovernance. Indian grants have helped develop the India-Africa Tele-education and Tele-medicine Network.[17]
- *Research and Innovation Ecosystems*: India's choices of research partners in frontier tech reflect a preference for democratic peers and a culture of scientific and technological innovation anchored in transparency, accountability, and openness. On gravitational waves, India has partnered with the United States and fellow democracies through the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory network. With the European Union, India is a founding member of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor project.

Contradictions and Constraints

India's recent initiatives indicate a preference for technology partnerships with other democratic powers. Officials have also frequently articulated the ambition for the country to be a leading

power, including through the "democratization of technology," in the words of Prime Minister Modi.[18] Such claims, however, could be complicated by three unresolved tensions in India's domestic practice and international posture. Those complications could delay or even divert India's democratic alignments and tech diplomacy.

The first is the temptation of government overreach. The frequency of internet shutdowns is perhaps the most visible symptom: India has consistently ranked among the top countries globally for the number of government-ordered network disruptions, a practice that directly contradicts the open, interoperable internet norms India espouses in international forums. The regulatory environment for major technology platforms has, in several respects, privileged government access to data and the interests of politically connected large-capital actors over the accountability and privacy frameworks that democratic governance ostensibly requires.

The second tension is multilateral skepticism. India has been a reluctant participant in—and at times an active opponent of—UN-centered approaches to technology governance. In the UN cybercrime convention and in internet governance forums, New Delhi has at times aligned with China and Russia to support governmental, territorial, and restrictive norms.[19] India's posture reflects a genuine concern for sovereignty, but its skepticism of multilateral action undermines its credibility in forums where the rules it claims to champion are being negotiated. Its minilateral innovations, such as the ISA and CDRI, are often seen as challenges to the universal, legally binding force of multilateralism, and New Delhi is likely to create similar clubs for cooperation on AI and other technology domains.

The third tension is normative resistance. India's historical posture in global governance has been defined by strategic autonomy—remaining on the sidelines of the liberal international order, rejecting characterizations of its practices as falling short of democratic standards, and demanding that norms and standards be developed with its full participation and that of other Global South countries. That instinct has not disappeared. India's simultaneous engagement with BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and democratic technology coalitions reflects a hedging strategy that, while rational from a sovereignty standpoint, limits its

effectiveness as a normative leader and signals ambiguity about its democratic commitments and alignments abroad.

Conclusion

No other country combines India's demographic scale, democratic credentials, technological capacity, and geopolitical positioning to serve as an anchor for democratic technology governance in the emerging international order. New Delhi's technology decisions in the coming years will prove decisive not only for India's own trajectory but also for the democratic character of the future international order.

Whether India can fulfill that potential over the next decade or two will hinge on both domestic and external factors. At home, those factors include the health of its democratic institutions, its government willingness to resist expanding state control over technology policy, and the robustness of judicial and civil society oversight of digital governance. Abroad, India's success hinges on the depth of the Global South's demand for India's digital model and New Delhi's ability to build a concert of democratic tech powers that coordinate policy through a complex web of bilateral, minilateral, and other international governance frameworks.

India's democracy has shown remarkable resilience over seven decades, surviving pressures that have broken democratic systems elsewhere. Whether its institutions can hold in an era of rapid technological change, concentrated digital power, and heightened political polarization is the central question of Indian democratic life—and the answer will directly determine India's credibility as a democratic technology power abroad.

For the time being, Indian decision-makers will likely be cautiously assessing the costs and benefits of trying to fill the vacuum created by U.S. retrenchment and European constraints, even as China doubles down on offering an alternative, state-centric, and autocratic tech governance model. The United States has historically been the indispensable external partner for India's engagement with democratic tech governance frameworks—providing institutional

access, financial resources, technical expertise, and the political legitimacy that comes from a shared democratic identity. Its withdrawal from that role does not merely create a vacuum; it actively reshapes India's calculus about whether democratic norm entrepreneurship is a worthwhile investment or a strategic liability.

U.S. decision-makers face a consequential choice. They can continue to opt out of the normative contest, leaving India to steward a democratic technology order alongside the European Union and other democratic powers—a fragile arrangement given the fiscal and political constraints facing those partners. Or they can re-engage with India and like-minded states to build the institutional architecture through which democratic technology norms can be advanced at scale, in the Global South as well as in standard-setting bodies and international frameworks.

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