

Why India's democracy still riles

China

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China does not like to speak about any of its vulnerabilities, but what it hates even more is any former Indian official, especially a noted China watcher like Vijay Gokhale, talking about its vulnerabilities



No doubt its innovations and enterprise have long surpassed India's, but even the hint of any Indian catch-up or competing model still gives China aggressive anxiety, which in itself tells a tale. (Representational image)

A comment by the former Indian foreign secretary and China specialist Vijay Gokhale has, seemingly, annoyed many Chinese analysts and commentators.

All Gokhale said was that, to paraphrase, India's democracy is an ideological challenge to China. It shows that another country, in Asia, with more than a billion people, in fact, at the moment most likely with more people than in China, can rapidly grow and pull out millions out of poverty and develop a military-industrial complex and make things at scale for the world.

A country that, at least in some sectors, like fintech, challenges the dominance of China and supersedes the Middle Kingdom. A country that is a nuclear weapon power. Yet, it does all this with a political system very different from China.

This has been apparent for a while now, so many wondered why this triggered several Chinese commentators, who responded in various ways, including one who said that the choice of democracy through universal adult franchise was a fatal flaw in the Indian system at the very start of the modern republic in 1947.

Apart from the fact that this is a complete misreading of the situation India faced in 1947, many in India wondered why such a simple statement would be so triggering, but the reasons are easy to understand.

From the days of Mao, the instinct of the Chinese leadership about India has been that of profound scepticism. India's loss in the 1962 war cemented this feeling, but to an extent, the expression of this feeling was held in check till the time that the two countries were at a similar economic level.

As China pulled away strongly in more recent decades, and the gap between the two Asian giants increased, Chinese disdain about India has exponentially risen. The Chinese leadership today, consumed with its competition with America, believes it is, or almost is, a peer competitor of the richest and most powerful country in the world. In their minds, India, still working its way through lower middle income, is a basket case – a more aspirational basket case today than ever but a basket case nonetheless. This is the story that the Chinese Communist Party has sold also to its people.

This much is easy to understand. But things are more complicated than this. India's recent spurt of growth, its projection of power (including soft power) and its diplomatic aggression have made the Chinese consider how India might yet complicate their neat ascension to the top of the global order.

That India lies on their border (and reaches right up to the mouth of the Malacca Strait) no doubt brings no joy to Xi Jinping and his advisers. Thus, the new narrative is about China's not-so-hidden hand behind Pakistan, even in the recent conflict after the terror attack in Pahalgam.

But this little play of psychological warfare is muddied by what's going on in China. The conflict between Xi and the People's Liberation Army is out in the open. While the Indian economy has taken a hit with the various wars and the price of oil, the Chinese economy has not been left untouched. China's efforts to boost domestic consumption

dramatically are not quite working the way its leaders may have wanted. And for all the bluster, the new narrative of the criticality of choke points only adds to China's worries. Its vulnerability at the Malacca Strait has been a historical concern, but its real-life ramifications have been shown starkly with the shutting of the Hormuz Strait. Even its solution to such a choke in the Belt and Road Initiative, especially its Pakistan leg, has stalled with no signs of any real revival. This is also why, no matter the narrative, China is deeply concerned about the proposed strategic and commercial Great Nicobar Project that India has planned.

As Japan talks up re-militarisation and friction continues in the South China Sea, Chinese are today confronted with issues they thought had, in some senses, been settled, at least for the near future.

China is in a curious position of finding both America and India weaker than before (in relative terms) but not as weak as it would have liked them to be. With India, another point of contention looms with the ageing of the Dalai Lama and the contest on global Buddhism.

Add to all of this that collapsing demographics and the China story of relentless, resilient power projection do not seem as certain anymore. More than anything else, this complicates the story China's leaders can tell their own people, who they fear much more than any external enemy. What if, in the mid- to long run, it turns out that India's messy democracy is able to deliver comparable, even if not equal, levels of governance and development? What does that do to the China story at all times when the country's leadership has been forced to announce the lowest growth target since

China does not like to speak about any of its vulnerabilities, but what it hates even more is any former Indian official, especially a noted China watcher like Gokhale, talking about its vulnerabilities. It would read Gokhale's statements as a proxy for what the Indian government might be wishing to convey, even though the diplomat is now retired.

It has been true for many years that China does a much better job of showcasing its successes than, certainly, India. No doubt its innovations and enterprise have long surpassed India's, but even the hint of any Indian catch-up or competing model still gives China aggressive anxiety, which in itself tells a tale.

(Hindol Sengupta is a professor of international relations at OP Jindal Global University. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.)