

India and China Spar Over Expulsion of Journalists as Visa Row Heats Up

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India and China are involved in a tit-for-tat over visas issued for their respective journalists. According to a report by the Wall Street Journal, New Delhi decided to not renew visas for the last two remaining Chinese journalists in India (one from Xinhua and the other from China Central Television).

This comes after a month of Beijing freezing visas for two Indian journalists (one of Hindu and the other Prasar Bharati) stationed in China. Both sides have stated that the steps taken are a reaction to the unfair treatment of journalists. For the first time since 1980, there will be no Chinese journalists in India.

What Each Side is Saying

While the Chinese side reiterates that it is just reacting to Indian actions, where Chinese journalists have faced challenges since 2017, the Indian side continues to hold that Chinese journalists with valid visas have never been prevented from continuing their work. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson recently said that the Indian journalists were welcome to come back but only after New Delhi agrees to rectify its errors.

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Arindam Bagchi, while stating that New Delhi hopes that Beijing permits Indian journalists to work in China, reiterated that there have been no challenges to the working of the foreign journalists in India while the Indian journalists stationed in China have been facing certain challenges.

However, it would be very naïve to look at this as just an issue surrounding the journalists or visas. It heavily underscores the differences between the perception and the role of media between India and China.

Media can play an important role in bridging the information and perception gap that exist between the two sides. India and China combined makeup almost a third of the world's population. Such actions will only increase the existing gaps while not leaving any scope for moderating and changing biased perceptions.

Differences in Indian and Chinese Media

The role of media in China is one in which it is expected to be the mouthpiece of the Party and propaganda. Before Xi came to power, there was some space for journalistic freedom. However, Xi Jinping has adopted multiple policies which have consistently increased control over the media. The space for freedom and critical thinking as well as reporting is consistently reducing.

The Chinese media is getting highly controlled and monitored. The media is expected to follow the Chinese Communist Party's (CPC) dictates but is also expected to acknowledge its aspirations. Every organization must be subsumed within the goals and agendas of the Party. The media is expected to report what the Party wants and how the Party wants it to. In addition to this, the media is to tow the Party line.

Under Xi, there is also a push that wants the media to 'tell the Chinese story right', both domestically as well as abroad.

This can only happen if every media organization, domestic and foreign, accept the Party's dictat. As a result, at times Chinese journalists have been looked at with apprehensions as they are perceived to be very close to the CPC.

The media in India is expected to be free and unbiased. As the fourth pillar of democracy, the role of media in opinion formation and critical reporting is essential. Only when the media is free democracies can function smoothly. However, this is in total contrast to how the Chinese media landscape is and thus would prove to be a major hurdle in the path of reporters posted in China.

It appears that the Indian journalists may have been victims of the fact that they would not be ready to report about things as expected by the CPC. Given the political differences, it is quite evident that there will be conflict in the roles which journalists would be expected to follow.

Potential Consequences in Sino-India Relations

This spat is definitely highlighting that India-China relations can spiral downward even further than what military and violent clashes across the LAC can achieve. Beijing has been trying to change the ground realities and push for its own narratives. Especially under Xi Jinping, this assertiveness has increased, and it feeds directly into Chinese nationalism which has been a deciding factor in the way Chinese foreign policy functions.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning has argued that the steps adopted by New Delhi underscore a cold war mentality as India perceives China to be a bigger threat.

Parallel to this there has been an increase in areas where India and China appear to be at loggerheads. On one hand, China sees India as being part of the American plan to contain China's rise. India's role in the Indo-Pacific, the QUAD as well as its inroads in the Pacific Island region have not been appreciated by Beijing.

China firmly looks at Indian geopolitical confidence as directly counter to its international position. In addition to this, the strong posturing adopted by New Delhi towards Beijing has further frayed the relationship. Developments in Indian since the abrogation of Article 370 and statements by Amit Shah claiming Aksai Chin as part of India, show a more vocal and resilient India.

Mitigating Negative Perceptions About China

However, the role played by Indian journalists in China has been very crucial for strengthening and educating the Indian people about Chinese society. The reporting fills a very prominent gap that has existed for a very long time, and which also has been an impediment to better people-to-people relations.

Even though India and China are close geographical neighbours the distance in perceptions could not be greater. Both countries have failed to understand each other's realities of society, politics, and limitations. Juxtaposing this with the amped-up military situation further complicates this fragile relationship.

Such actions will further reduce international faith in the Chinese media. Generally, Chinese reporting is seen to be heavily pushed by propaganda and not genuine.

One can only hope that Xi and the CPC realize that honest and ground reporting about developments in China by Indian journalists could prove to be an important step in mitigating the negative perceptions and bridging the existing gaps in understanding. Building more walls and cutting the small cord of communication will further add to the mistrust about China within India.

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