India’s ideological battle with China

The future of democracy in Asia and the world may well be determined by choices India makes.

India and China have reportedly agreed to carry out disengagement of their forces along the Line of Actual Control and this is positive news. However, heightened mistrust will remain and there will continue to be wariness on the Indian side about how the Chinese may make in the coming days. The additional claims to territory that China has made have been reiterated. On the economic and trade fronts, it is likely that there will be a decrease beyond what was already the result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Cross-investment by Indian and Chinese firms may still if not decrease, so we may have our own version of “decoupling” in progress. The situation and that will accentuate this trend. It is clear that the consensus that underlay India-China relations for the past several decades has broken down. What were the key elements of this consensus?

One is that India was not a threat to China and China was not a threat to India. Two, that there was enough room in Asia and the world for both India and China to grow. Three, India was an economic opportunity for China and China for India. And, four, that India-China relations had acquired a strategic and global dimension, thus enhancing the importance of strong and cooperative relations between them. Precisely for this reason, the two sides wished to seek a political resolution to their boundary issue so that they could work together on a series of global issues where they had convergent interests. This consensus was made explicit during the visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to India in 2005 but has been steadily eroding at least since 2009. The last time India and China worked together on a global issue was during the Copenhagen Climate Change summit in 2009. The change was visible during Wen Jiabao’s subsequent visit to India in 2010 when he declared that the border issue may be resolved only in the long term.

In 2018, during the Paris Climate summit, it was the template worked out by the US and China that became the basis of the Paris Agreement. India was no longer a key player. China began to benchmark itself against the US and relegated India, and even “admiring Mr Modi” will also be painted in the ideological colour of its currently more powerful rival. If India is determined to contest Chinese dominance in Asia, it will have to do so not only in the military and economic fields, but also in the ideological field. Reaffirming faith in our liberal democracy and the values enshrined in the Indian Constitution are indispensable to confronting Chinese hubris. It is unfortunate that there has been a tendency in this country to hold up China as a model that India must aspire to. There is constant bemoaning that being a democracy has held back India, and even admiring Mr Modi because he is a “strong leader” like Xi Jinping.

In failing to acknowledge India’s incredible success in managing a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-cultural society and that, too, without sacrificing individual freedoms and dignity as its greatest strength, we undervalue the very asset which distinguishes us from the and homogeneity that China aspires to. China is welcome to its monochromatic future. That must never be India’s aspiration. If Asia does become a Chinese-dominated space, it will not only be because India failed to get its economic act together but also because it did not stand up for its democratic credentials. The future of democracy in Asia and the world may well be determined by choices India makes.

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