



Indian Democracy in Strategic Perspective: Q&A with Sushant Singh

Sushant Singh

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India Policy: Before becoming a policy analyst, you served in the Indian army for over 20 years. Last month, the press relations officer for the Ministry of Defense in Jammu tweeted pictures of an iftar celebration organized by the army in the Doda district, noting that the officers were "keeping alive the traditions of #secularism." The tweet was later taken down after being trolled by Hindu nationalist sympathizers, such as the editor-in-chief of Sudarshan News, Suresh Chavhanke, who said the "disease [of secularism] has now spread even into the army." This is a rare instance of a military institution caving to external pressure.

With experts' concerns about rising illiberalism in India, have you noticed changes in the functioning or public posture of the Indian military?

Singh: Indian armed forces have always taken great pride in their secular and multiethnic nature, which is aligned with the values enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The deletion of the tweet was therefore a striking gesture by the army PRO, effectively kowtowing to pressure by fundamentalist forces. When that happens in India's only Muslim-majority region of Jammu and Kashmir, it makes the impact far worse.

Visibly, one would be hard-pressed to find incidents of gross overt changes in the behavior of the Indian military. However, I am reminded of the late Gen. Bipin Rawat's choice to skip Indian Navy Day in order to appear as chief guest at a Hindu nationalist function in Gorakhpur, as well as a recent video of a ceremonial parade where Hindu devotional songs and practices were used in place of secular army traditions. Both incidents went viral and were [remarked upon](#) by retired military officers such as Lt. Gen. H.S. Panag, Adm. L. Ramdas, and [Commodore C. Uday Bhaskar](#).

India Policy: Shared views about China's role in the Indo-Pacific appear to have brought the U.S. and India closer together on matters of defense and economic cooperation. Where India is concerned, the Chinese incursion in Ladakh has further strained Indo-Chinese ties that have already been weakening since the early 2000s due to skirmishes along the Line of Actual Control and disputed activities in the South China Sea. This ebb in Indo-Chinese ties is also marked by increasing political consolidation — within China under President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party, as well as within India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party. The nature and consequences of this

consolidation appear to be different in the two countries. For China, some [associate](#) a centralized party under Xi with a more muscular foreign policy and bolstered its Chinese [military](#) and [economic](#) power.

For India, however, [scholars note](#) that increasing centralization of power at the national level has occurred at the expense of federalism and of independent democratic institutions. Further, political centralization in India has not accrued benefits, either to the Indian economy or to the country's national security. On the contrary, there is the sense that the emerging model of governance in India has actually exposed the country to *greater* risks — though the allure of a more authoritarian polity remains attractive for some Indians.

How might the Chinese perceive India's recent democratic backsliding? In what ways is China's increased aggressive posture vis-à-vis India taking advantage of this backsliding?

Singh: The backsliding of democracy in India only validates and reaffirms Beijing's ideological view that a liberal democracy is incapable of delivering in a big country. This is an argument they have made for a long time. They would also like to use this backsliding in India to attract Delhi closer to a lo

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is never going to do. It welcomed Modi, then chief minister of Gujarat, when Western countries had denied him a visa for his role in the 2002 Gujarat riots.

India's stance on Russia signals that it is comfortable dealing with countries that are not democracies as long as that serves Indian interests. There is no values-based idea driving Indian policy that puts non-democracies on the opposite side as adversaries. It means India will have a relationship with China based on its strategic interests, which may not always align with the U.S.

India Policy: There is a common perception that India is the exemplar of democracy in South Asia, whereas Pakistan has often been framed as a military-led technocracy. In recent years, however, some experts have begun [to analogize the prospects](#) for India's political trajectory to the Pakistani experience. They point to risks in India's civil-military relations, rising religious fundamentalism, and the resulting diminishing returns to the economy as three examples of how India should avoid the pitfalls Pakistan has historically faced. Concerns also abound as to how democratic backsliding in India may affect stability in the South Asian subcontinent, not least of all in India-Pakistan ties.

