

A chequered view of Chinese colours Li's Indian travails

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For Australians, it should be disturbing news that two of the countries that matter most to this nation's future in the Asian Century have a relationship of mistrust.

A major new survey of Indian public opinion, published this week, reveals that most Indians are worried about what China's rise means for them. Indeed, 83 per cent see China as a security threat to India.

This is despite the fact that China has become India's largest trading partner, and that the two governments are trying to improve diplomatic ties, Li Keqiang visiting India this week in his first trip abroad as Premier.

Indians' mixed feelings about China capture one of many policy dilemmas for New Delhi identified in the poll, one of the most comprehensive surveys into what Indians think about their nation's future.

The poll, a joint project by the Lowy Institute for International Policy and the Australia India Institute, also highlights the depth of Indian concern about Pakistan, as well as emerging threats like shortages of water, food and energy.

It is a representative survey of 1233 Indians from all segments of society. It was conducted in seven languages throughout most geographical regions of the world's largest democracy.

The results reveal a fascinating duality about how Indians see their future, a combination of hope and fear that could well find substance in next year's national elections.

On the one hand, 74 per cent of Indians are optimistic about prospects for their economy, despite its recent stumbles. But Indians are divided about whether the fruits of rapid growth are being justly distributed.

And most Indians see major problems looming. Shortages of energy, water and food, along with climate change, register as the most important challenges, with 80-85 per cent of Indians rating these issues as "big threats" to their country's security.

Asked about their attitudes to other countries, Indians say they like the US most and Pakistan least.

And Australia rates highly. Asked to rate their feelings towards 22 other countries on a scale of 0 to 100, Indians rank the US first, then Singapore, Japan and Australia, well ahead of countries in Europe or the so-called BRICS -- including Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa -- with which India is sometimes seen to have some economic or diplomatic affinities.

Despite the civilian-led nature of modern India, it turns out that Indians are exceptionally attached to their armed forces: 95 per cent see the possession of a strong military as very important for India to achieve its aims in the world.

And, despite traditions of strategic autonomy and non-alignment, 72 per cent of Indians attach great importance to India having strong countries as partners -- perhaps reflecting a growing pragmatism about how India can thrive and survive.

On Pakistan, the news is not all bad. Although an overwhelming majority (94 per cent) of Indians see Pakistan as a threat, citing terrorism as a major reason, 89 per cent agree that ordinary people in both countries want peace. And a similarly large majority, 87 per cent, agree that a big improvement in India-Pakistan relations requires courageous leadership on both sides, 76 per cent agreeing that as the larger country India should take the initiative.

But with Li's visit the relationship of the moment is between India and China, the world's two most populous states, uneasy neighbours and nations upon whose strategic choices much of the future security and prosperity of humanity will rest.

And here the opinion poll confirms that wariness about China's rise is a view widely held among Indian citizens.

As recent reports of a new Chinese incursion on the disputed border remind us, India and China have a difficult history going back to a brief but bitter war in 1962.

The poll reveals multiple reasons for popular Indian misgivings about China, including China's possession of nuclear weapons, competition for resources in third countries, China's efforts to strengthen its relations with other countries in the Indian Ocean region, and the border dispute.

But in responding to China's rise most Indians want an each-way bet: 65 per cent agree India should join other countries to limit China's influence yet a similar number (64 per cent) agree that India should co-operate with China to play a leading role in the world.

For Australia, one thing is clear: Julia Gillard's vision of a peaceful and prosperous Asian Century will depend heavily on circumstances that Canberra can do little to control -- whether India and China can move beyond mistrust.

Li clearly has some persuading to do.

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