

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*China's Rise as a Norm
Builder and Challenges to
the Idea of Democracy*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:

Avinash Anil Godbole

3 September 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker: Prof. Avinash Anil Godbole, Professor and Associate Dean, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat.

Chair: Dr. Rityusha Mani Tiwary, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Shaheed Bhagat Singh College, University; and, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar explored how China challenges the liberal democratic model by equating development with democracy, thereby de-linking political liberalisation from economic growth. This framing enables China to promote its governance system as a legitimate alternative for the Global South, raising critical implications for the future of the regional and global order, and for India’s strategic positioning.
- The speaker argued that China’s rise is marked by a paradox of being both powerful and insecure. While its economic success, military strength, and institutional presence grant it global status, doubts about the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and persistent external scepticism, foster insecurity. This duality explains its coercive regional behavior, continuous search for legitimacy, and efforts to assert discourse power on the world stage.
- Prof. Godbole emphasised how China constructs global norms through initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), and Global Security Initiative (GSI). Each is designed not only to offer solutions to global crises but also to embed criticism of the Western-led order, portraying China as an inclusive, benevolent, and responsible power.
- China’s discourse power strategy — telling the “Chinese story well” — has expanded since Xi Jinping’s ascent to power. Through white papers, speeches, and diplomacy, Beijing contrasts Western interventions, like in the case of the Arab Spring, as destabilising, while presenting itself as a promoter of stability and humane authority.

This rhetoric resonates with developing nations frustrated by Western exclusivity, thereby enhancing China’s appeal.

- Against the backdrop of democratic backsliding and populism in the West, China positions its model as more stable and effective. The speaker noted that liberal democracies’ perceived failures — elitism, inefficiency, rising inequality, and the retreat of welfare functions — have weakened their legitimacy. In this milieu, China’s authoritarian governance combined with economic delivery is presented as a “working democracy”, gaining surprising admiration even in countries like India.
- According to Prof. Godbole, a central argument lies in China’s redefinition of democracy. The 2021 white paper titled, “China: Democracy That Works”, asserts that democracy and dictatorship are not contradictory, and that development itself embodies democracy. By framing equity, stability, and material well-being as democratic outcomes, China challenges the liberal emphasis on elections, rights, and pluralism, while rejecting universality of norms such as human rights.
- The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the GDI, and related programmes demonstrate China’s dual strategy: operating within existing international frameworks like the UN and SDGs, while simultaneously creating parallel institutions such as the AIIB, the SCO, and the NDB, that rival Western dominance. This two-pronged approach legitimises its leadership role while reshaping global governance on its own terms.
- The speaker cautioned that China’s norm-building poses significant consequences for India and other democracies. Its growing influence abroad strengthens its legitimacy at home, while its promotion of an alternative governance model may erode the global dominance of liberal democracy. As few other powers are offering competing visions of governance, China’s initiatives are filling a normative vacuum — posing both challenges and strategic dilemmas for India.

Disclaimer: This is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speakers and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies. Since this is a summary, it cannot be used for citation without confirming with the speaker(s).