

# It is not enough to have a strong govt; you need a strong country

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*While the govt has done many things right, it has also made mistakes that have weakened India. It should acknowledge challenges, reverse economic slide, and build national cohesion.*

You cannot accuse the Narendra Modi government of lack of ambition. With that, and with full confidence in its own abilities, it set its sights high in 2014 — double-digit economic growth and transformative change. Since then, it has claimed at various times to have done more in its relatively brief period in office than previous governments did in 60 years. Such sweeping claims are always open to question, especially since any government stands on the shoulders of the ones that went before. Regardless, it has been part of this government's core agenda to push India forward economically, tackle at least one form of inequality by improving people's access to basic goods and services, and improve India's international standing.

So what's to complain? Well, there are elements of its DNA that come in the way of precisely those goals. First, it does not admit to failure or like failure being pointed out by others. When faced with unplanned outcomes, it falls silent (as on the Covid-19 numbers that are getting rapidly worse), plays with the numbers (as with GDP) or wraps itself in the national flag and accuses critics of being anti-national and traitorous. On occasion it has even spun out failure as success, helped along by collaborative media elements.

This approach invites trouble because anyone in high office usually lives in a bubble. Those surrounding the leader, even if they are not singing hosannas, are not likely to speak the blunt truth. For a variety of reasons, the Opposition may not be able to do its job, or to do it effectively. Expert opinion may be offered, but self-confident autocrats can think they know better. And if media criticism is suppressed, then a vital reality check is knocked out. While Mr Modi may be too smart to fall for his own propaganda, the official narrative of positive transformative change has become increasingly untenable. For its own sake, the government should course correct.

While the government has done many things right, it has also made serious mistakes that have weakened the country. The obvious examples are demonetisation which the experts had advised against, the botched goods and services tax that has delivered less rather than more revenue (relative to GDP), and the dramatic lockdown of March 24, with its avoidable human toll. If Mr Modi had been asked four months ago to define success vis-a-vis Covid, it is doubtful that he would have said the world's second-highest tally of daily cases constitutes success.

There are other misses: The failure to fix public sector banks despite unconscionable sums of money being thrown at them; ditto with dispensable government entities like Air India; the lack

of a return so far on massive railway investment; the poor progress on promoting manufacturing; the impact of these failures on the fisc and the consequential neglect of defence. There are successes to set off against these failures, as one should expect. What should concern us is that the Modi government's record has deteriorated with the passage of time, and the cumulative impact of failures is adding up.

It does not help that Mr Modi's sense of mission brings with it the impulse to accumulate power in ways that work in direct opposition to the declared objective of building a strong, properly governed country. A short list would include the calculated erosion of autonomous institutions, the partisan use of the government's prosecutorial powers, and the divisions stoked by beloved initiatives like the amended citizenship law.

The holes in the official narrative and weaknesses in the country's comprehensive national power, broadly defined as the Chinese do it to include resources and capabilities, are laid bare when Beijing pushes some military buttons. Instead of the government tying itself in knots to fudge the truth on the border, it should frankly acknowledge the challenge, recognise the pitfalls of personalised diplomacy, correct the neglect of defence, reverse the economic slide of the past three years, and build national cohesion. As someone said, it is not enough to have a strong government, you need a strong country. And for delivering that the Modi administration has to re-examine its approach and start functioning differently.