

Printed from

THE TIMES OF INDIA

China's X factor, and why India needs its own narrative

TNN | Sep 13, 2026, 05.00 AM IST



Xi Jinping's call to "tell China's story well" dates to 2013. Since then, a large institutional ecosystem has grown around what Beijing calls "discourse power," the ability to define how the world reads its rise, rather than leaving that job to Western media. One linguistic point helps: The Chinese word for propaganda, *xuanchuan*, carries none of the negative charge it has in English, meaning simply publicity, a normal state function.

In January 2014, Xi called for "new type think-tanks with Chinese characteristics," ushering in an era of well-funded think-tanks positioned to be more persuasive abroad than the old state media. As these official bodies also have a credibility deficit, the party-state subsequently encouraged a new cohort of quasi-private think-tanks.

As India's Ambassador in Beijing, I noted the growing salience of think-tanks in China, and an India-China Think-Tanks Forum was set up in 2015, which met four times through 2019. Chinese delegations visited India frequently until 2020. Reverse traffic was thinner, Indian think-tanks being penurious next to their well-endowed Chinese counterparts. Chinese scholars kept close to their brief, but there was genuine exchange. Chinese interlocutors did not display the hubris visible today.

Chinese transgressions in eastern Ladakh and Galwan broke that pattern almost overnight in 2020, freezing contact. After a hiatus, a nimbler strategy followed. Chinese diplomats moved onto the social media platforms Indians use, often dropping their combative 'wolf warrior' tone. Advertorials on Tibet's development ran in mainstream Indian papers, alongside journalist fellowships and curated visits. The message stuck to a familiar script: China was reasonable and misunderstood; India reactive; actions on the Line of Actual Control defensive rather than provocative; and relations could be best normalised without linking them to the border.

Over the past two years, Chinese efforts have become more calibrated and inventive. The more interesting change is not institutional but personal. A handful of Chinese scholars have built genuine followings among Indian foreign policy watchers on X, a platform blocked in China itself. Think-tanks are often staffed by younger scholars who sound independent even while their conclusions stay within the Communist Party's line. Some of them write directly for Indian readers and argue, by name, with Indian officials and analysts, flipping one commentator's doubts about the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's value for India into a question about India's value to the bloc, or dismissing the external affairs minister's trade comments as an admission of weakness. Watching this unfold in public has been something of a spectacle, a shift from institutions addressing institutions to individuals arguing with individuals. Chinese diplomats too are stepping out of their cloistered circles of fellow travellers, though cautiously.

How much of this actually lands? Less than the effort invested would suggest. The modest global warming toward China that Pew recorded in 2025 and 2026, linked to falling US ratings, barely touched India, where America is still favoured over China. Narrower footholds exist in business circles seeking less constrained economic ties, in pockets of the strategic commentariat drawn to Beijing as compensation for the downturn with Washington, and in Track 1.5 dialogues that stayed open even as official contact thinned. The govt's own vocabulary since 2024 has been careful, seeking re-engagement, not reset, though the phrase 'partners and not

rivals' has resurfaced. None of this amounts to a major shift in how most Indians see China but gives the govt room to manage the relationship without looking soft, provided any opening stays conditional on security, reciprocity and de-risking.

Confucius Institutes never took root here, and nothing since suggests India got that wrong. A model once seen as Chinese cultural diplomacy's soft edge is being dismantled where it was first welcomed. The US has closed the roughly hundred it once hosted. There is no case for revisiting our caution now.

India's response should avoid two temptations: complacency about a strategy that has not won over the public at large, and alarm about one that has found real footholds among specific audiences. An open information environment remains a genuine advantage against a system that cannot risk the same openness at home; reciprocal re-stationing of journalists and closer civil society engagement should move forward.

India also needs to build its own narrative inside China, despite entrenched perceptions and constraints on activities of the Indian Embassy, media and think-tanks. Amid growing pushback against China's outsized share of global manufacturing trade, India accounted for at least 10% of China's record trade surplus last year, and its standing as Buddhism's birthplace still carries real weight there. These are organic assets, not manufactured talking points, and Indian outreach should utilise them deliberately, though returns will be slow.

The clearest message, though, is one for Beijing rather than for us. No amount of nimble messaging or well-funded outreach will improve how China is seen in India as long as it shows so little sensitivity to India's concerns

and aspirations, and its vision of Asia keeps slotting India in as a lesser power expected to defer rather than a nation with its own agency. Until China treats India as a peer civilisation, if not a peer nation, rather than a subordinate, the image problem will remain substantially of its own making.