

EXPERT VIEW

How India has navigated the CPC



Ashok K Kantha

Chinese President Xi Jinping on July called the Communist Party of China's (CPC) 105-year history the most magnificent epic in the annals of the nation. Since 1949, the party has organised its history into three self-perceived stages: Mao Zedong's China "standing up", Deng Xiaoping's China "growing prosperous", and, since 2012, Xi's China "becoming strong", measured against the 2049 centenary of the People's Republic.

It is worth asking what these three stages have actually meant for India, and — since counterfactuals sharpen argument even when they cannot be proven — whether a different party in China after 1949 would have made much difference at all.

The framing of "standing up" (*zhàn qǐ lái*), "growing prosperous" (*fù qǐ lái*), and "becoming strong" (*qiáng qǐ lái*) stages a single, older goal predating the party: The Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation (*zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*). Reading the post-1949 record through this periodisation is more useful than treating it as an undifferentiated block, worth remembering that the party's own account smooths over a story full of turmoil, particularly in the "standing up" stage.

The leadership

Mao's China "stood up" by ending a century of foreign predation and warlord fragmentation. The reality was messier

and more violent, and two developments from this period still shape the country's relations with India, with a third Chinese upheaval at play.

The first was the absorption of Tibet. Within weeks of the People's Republic of China's founding, incorporating Tibet was declared a top priority, and by October 1950 the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had crossed into eastern Tibet. The Seventeen-Point Agreement of May 1951, which Lhasa signed under duress, formalised Chinese control. Decades of buffer, weak Qing (the last ruling dynasty) suzerainty and practical Tibetan independence after 1912 became a contested border defended against China.

Between Tibet and the border war in 1962 lay an episode with nothing directly to do with India but which did much to determine when and why that war happened: The Great Leap Forward. Mao's 1958-62 campaign to collectivise agriculture and force industrialisation through backyard steel furnaces produced probably the worst famine in recorded history. Frank Dikötter put the death toll at a minimum of 45 million; Yang Jisheng arrived independently at roughly 36 million. Either way, it nearly cost Mao his position at the apex of the party.

The second development was the 1962 war itself. The revisionist case, made most influentially by Neville Maxwell in India's China War (1970), places the



The author, a former ambassador to China, now teaches international relations at Chanakya University. Views expressed are personal

burden of causation on India and its 1961 Forward Policy, which deployed lightly armed outposts in contested areas, provoking China into “self-defence”. This does not survive close scrutiny. What explains the war are domestic upheaval and the Dalai Lama’s flight to India in March 1959, apart from the boundary differences and China’s anxieties over the unfolding Sino-Soviet split.

Mao’s authority had collapsed after the Great Leap Forward. At the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference of January 1962, Liu Shaoqi delivered a blunt public reckoning of the famine, calling it a “man-made disaster”, and Mao needed an external crisis to reunify the party and army and discredit the pragmatists managing his mess. A short, decisively won war, timed for October 1962, when both superpowers were consumed by the Cuban missile crisis, served that purpose, while consolidating China’s territorial claims and diluting Jawaharlal Nehru’s claim to Third World leadership. The consequence for India is undisputed: A defeat that entrenched a trust deficit and shaped Indian strategic culture for a generation, outlasting even the “peace and tranquillity” framework of the 1990s and 2000s.

All three episodes belonged to what the party frames as consolidation after “standing up”: Securing the frontier by force, disciplining a neighbour perceived as insufficiently deferential, and using a foreign war to repair domestic damage from policy failure. India bore the cost of a revolutionary state fixing its territorial perimeter and internal politics at once.

Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and opening”, launched in 1978, delivered results at scale on the party’s fuqiang project: The pursuit of wealth and power that Orville Schell and John Delury trace back through Sun Yat-sen and the late Qing self-strengtheners. For three decades China compounded growth rates India could not match, and the gap in comprehensive national power became structural, an asymmetry in

gross domestic product, manufacturing depth, infrastructure financing, and diplomatic weight underlying subsequent Chinese assertiveness. India’s own gradualist liberalisation from 1991 lacked China’s central direction over investment and export strategy. By the 2010s, China’s economy had grown roughly five times India’s, with leverage, infrastructure, supply chains and standard-setting never available to a Guomindang-scale or Mao-scale China. “Becoming strong” used this wealth as an instrument in contested territorial claims and economic policy alike.

The “becoming strong” stage, dated to Xi’s 2012 ascent, converted China’s rise into direct pressure on India’s periphery, and into a bid for civilisational legitimacy with its own bearing on India. Four strands stand out.

The first is the post-2008 assertive turn, crystallised in the Belt and Road Initiative from 2013 and, for India, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. This has brought India face to face with the G2 overlay, a narrowing of its strategic space as the United States and China compete for pre-eminence even while stabilising ties, with Chinese periphery diplomacy reshaping how India can manoeuvre in its neighbourhood.

The second is China’s multipronged encroachment in Eastern Ladakh in the summer of 2020, the deadly Galwan clash, and the border standoff that followed: “Becoming strong” translated into forward military posture undermining the status quo along the border. Six years on, disengagement has proceeded with lingering “buffer zones” and no progress on de-escalation, a reminder that the Xi-era CPC reads strength through willingness to test contested ground.

The third, less material, is the party’s turn to civilisational legitimacy. As Rana Mitter has argued, the CPC needed a third pillar of legitimacy beyond wealth and power, increasingly located in a

reworked claim to Chinese cultural greatness. Xi now routinely describes China as the world’s sole uninterrupted civilisation of 5,000 years, denying India’s equally ancient lineage: The surface expression of a worldview inherited from the imperial past, with China at the moral and political centre of a hierarchical order that cannot, by its own logic, accommodate a co-equal civilisational peer in Asia.

A fourth strand runs through economics and diplomacy together: An unwillingness to let India’s re-emergence unfold as a complementary, equal process. Periphery diplomacy in Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh and Myanmar has worked to keep India boxed within a South Asian frame even as China flexes its muscle in Asia-Pacific. India’s large, widening trade deficit with China compounds this, and the latter has periodically weaponised the resulting dependencies, restricting exports of fertiliser inputs, rare-earth magnets, and specialised machinery during moments of friction. Public talk of “elephant-dragon tango” has not translated into treating India’s rejuvenation as complementary rather than a rival claim to be checked.

A counterfactual is useful here: It isolates what is attributable to communist rule and what would have confronted India regardless of who governed in China. Suppose the Guomindang had prevailed in the civil war. Would Tibet have been left alone? Almost certainly not.

Chiang Kai-shek had asserted as early as 1943 that Tibet was Chinese territory and no foreign power would be permitted to interfere. He repeated the claim in 1946, calling Tibetans Chinese nationals. Nationalist China’s own 1946-47 Constitution wrote Tibet into the structure of the state, and Chiang’s government was already pressuring Lhasa and moving troops to the Tibetan border in 1942. The Guomindang lacked the CPC’s ideological urgency to “liberate” a “feudal theocracy”, but shared the territorial claim.

Would the border have been handled differently? Perhaps to an extent: An under-resourced, the US-dependent Guomindang state might have negotiated rather than fought or lacked the military capacity a consolidated PLA possessed by 1962. But the underlying claim long precedes the CPC. M Taylor Fravel's study argues China's approach since 1949 has been driven less by ideology than by calculations of regime security and relative power, which would have applied to a Guomindang state too.

Chiang's own writing reinforces the point. Scholarship on republican-era nationalism shows Chiang framed China's "lost territories" as fortresses to be returned before China could be secure. Schell and Delury trace the fuqiang thread, wealth and power to erase the "century of humiliation", continuously from the late Qing reformers through Sun Yat-sen and the Nanjing decade into Mao and Deng alike; China's "National Humiliation Day" was itself a republican, not communist, institution.

A Guomindang state, no less than Xi's CPC, would have carried into its dealings with India a self-image inherited from imperial narratives, leaving little room for a peer.

This suggests that a meaningful share of India's China challenge is structural and civilisational, rooted in the scale of a historically hegemonic neighbour recovering from relative weakness, rather than contingent on communist rule. A Guomindang China would very likely have pressed Tibet and carried the same restorative ambition into the neighbourhood, differing perhaps in methods and achievements, not in fundamental orientation.

India's policy

The distinction matters for how India calibrates its managed competition with China. The frontier claim, restorative ambition and disparity in scale are not projections of Marxism-Leninism. They would have confronted India under a Guomindang mandarin too.

This is not merely a Western or Indian reading. Chinese realist scholars themselves — Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua prominent among them — write candidly of China's rise as a return to great-power status, framed in terms of comprehensive national power recovering ground lost since the Qing, echoing near-identical Guomindang-era language and suggesting a national elite consensus rather than a party-specific programme.

China's rhetoric of mutual respect for each other's concerns and interests has rarely translated into practice: China shields Pakistan-based terrorism from United Nations sanctions, blocks India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), and gives no ground on a permanent Security Council seat — evidence that India's interests and aspirations have not been taken on board, notwithstanding protestations to the contrary.

What is CPC-specific is more the instrumentation than the objective: A Leninist party's capacity for sustained, centrally directed mobilisation — of Belt and Road resources, PLA modernisation, and boundary infrastructure — that a fractious, coalition-dependent Guomindang would have struggled to replicate. Deng's reform era is hard to imagine under a Guomindang state, which never overcame factionalism.

For India, the practical upshot is to treat the relations with China as a long civilisational contest over scale and standing that will persist, while recognising that the tempo and forward assertiveness of the post-2012 period are tied to this party's Leninist capacity and Xi's own reading of "becoming strong". Firmness on the frontier, differentiated derisking, and steady investment in India's own comprehensive national power remain the logical response.

The current, difficult phase cannot be considered fixed for all time to come. The record here should caution against wishful thinking, but equally against its mirror image: That China is an ordained adversary whose hostility is written into

the relations' DNA. Both the Great Leap Forward's fallout and the Guomindang counterfactual point to the same lesson: Chinese conduct towards India has been shaped by leadership, internal politics, and relative capability, not an unchanging civilisational script.

A famine-weakened Mao needed a war in 1962; a differently positioned communist leadership might have chosen otherwise on identical territorial claims.

The balance of comprehensive national power driving "becoming strong" will not stay fixed, either. India's own growth trajectory, diversifying supply chains, favourable demographic trends, and a more multipolar Asia could alter how China calculates the costs of pressure on its southern frontier.

A China facing slower growth and an ageing population might find greater value in stable relations with India, just as a China at the height of relative strength calculated that assertiveness carried few costs.

However, India would be unwise to bank its security on this plausibility materialising. The historical record counsels dealing with China as it actually is: Its stated claims, demonstrated willingness to use force or economic leverage, and the current leadership's incentives, rather than a China imagined either as an implacable civilisational rival or a partner merely awaiting the right diplomatic gesture.

The CPC's own chosen story — standing up, growing prosperous, and becoming strong — describes a project of national restoration pursued since well before 1921, its methods varying from Mao's revolutionary violence to Deng's patient accumulation to Xi's forward assertiveness, its civilisational self-image consistently leaving little space for India as an equal.

India's task is to respond to the China in front of it rather than the China of its fears or hopes, keeping open the possibility that shifts in relative strength and geopolitics could yet produce a more accommodative China. ■