

India braces for 19th Communist Party Congress in China

Global attention has been on the "games of throne" taking place around the 19th Communist Party Congress gathering at Beijing this week which is expected to select the new sixth generation of leaders to steer the country for the next decade and a half. Explicitly, due to the current excessive focus on the political and military leadership selection issues, there will hardly be anything substantial pronouncements on external dimensions at the Congress, except for a few innocuous passages in the work report by the party secretary.

However, going by the previous such Congresses, even such pithy statements provide guidance to the foreign policy establishment of China for the next five years and beyond. The 16th Party Congress in 2002, for instance formulated a "three pillars" foreign policy strategy for China to include relations with major powers, neighbours, and developing countries. The next 17th Party Congress in 2007 extended these three pillars to five pillars to include multilateralism and soft power. The 18th Party Congress in 2012, which brought Xi Jinping to power, reiterated the five pillars in addition to directing the armed forces to play bigger role "commensurate to the international standing" of China.

By 2010, China had become the second largest economy with its outreach extending to faraway nooks and corners of the world. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj noticed during her trip to Beijing in February 2015 that of the five pillars, China is reluctant to include India in the "new type of major power" category.

Since the 18th Party Congress, Chinese President Xi Jinping's several statements at Politburo meetings and outside have affected several countries, including India. Xi has told his party colleagues that China will not sacrifice its "core interests" even if these contradict with its developmental interests. He is not only likely to be re-elected to all his three powerful positions at the 19th Party Congress-as president, as general secretary of the CPC and as chairman of the Military Commission-there is talk that Xi will remain China's most powerful leader when the 20th Party Congress meets five years from now.

Xi's strong security language has been seen mainly as assuaging nationalist domestic constituents, but India has gradually noticed that China's armed forces and border guards have been ramping up their nibbling activities on the undefined border, in addition to claiming vast swathes of territory in the South China Sea and Japanese-claimed Senkaku islands.

Xi's first comments on relations with India were encouraging, even if bland. Speaking to the *PTI* correspondent before embarking on his first visit to Delhi in 2014 after taking over as President, Xi was moderate in his views and suggested the expansion of strategic communication among leaders, maintaining border stability, enhancing economic cooperation and people-to-people contacts. Next in command, Premier Li Keqiang also made his first overseas visit to India.

While such overtures are not lost on the Indian leadership, both the United Progressive Alliance and National Democratic Alliance were surprised with China's forays in the Depsang plains in April-May 2013, Chumar in 2014 as well as 2015 - both of which took place in the Western sector - as well as in the Barahoti area of the Middle sector in mid-2016; a few months ago, India braced itself as the Chinese brazenly attempted to build a road in Bhutanese claimed Doklam area.

Strategic communication bereft of a serious intent to resolve outstanding issues between the two countries convinced the Indian leadership to firm up on border management.

Following the 18th party injunctions, India also suddenly saw major Chinese forays in the Indian

Ocean Region with China opening a naval base at Djibouti, in addition to port facilities built at Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan.

Significantly, China had also dispatched several submarines to Colombo, Karachi and to the Indian Ocean. China's submarine signals are not lost on India given the German disruption of trade through submarine warfare during the World War II. India, then, will be carefully watching the missions the Communist Party entrusts to the Chinese military both in the continental and maritime spheres. Besides, cyber and space domains will also be watched carefully as new domains for possible conflict, competition or even cooperation between the two "simultaneously rising" countries in Asia.

India is also pondering about the endgame around China's One Belt One Road initiative launched since September 2013. While India joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and consented to the building of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor - the two projects that dovetail with the OBOR - the nationalist BJP government was unable to come to terms with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that passes through Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir.

Strategically, if China's intent through OBOR is to "set up a different kitchen" through a Sino-centric global order, then New Delhi is concerned about leadership issues in the region. Since the early 2000s, as a co-existence strategy, India and China have formulated "enough space in Asia" for both countries. However, with OBOR, China appears to be gobbling up such spaces in Asia and beyond. The 19th Party Congress is expected to further clarify on this issue.

This party Congress is also likely to reiterate China's support to the globalisation process, for which Xi Jinping campaigned at Davos earlier this year. Indeed, both China and India have been supporting such processes at the G-20, Doha Rounds and WTO meetings. Nevertheless, while China is dependent on Western markets for exports, India is predominantly concerned about financial flows.

Also, India is aware that despite several promises, total Chinese investments in India so far do not exceed more than \$4 billion even as India lost to China nearly \$400 billion in trade deficit in the last decade.

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