

Arming India's response to Xi Jinping thought

The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (NCCPC) held at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing came to a conclusion last week. The NCCPC is held every five years in the fourth calendar quarter and is technically the apex body of the single party that has ruled China since the Communist revolution in 1949. In recent years, the NCCPC has lasted about a week each time and it is commonly understood that all important decisions are taken before the meeting convenes. The NCCPC is a giant career-defining body that shifts people upwards, laterally or out. Younger members are inducted every five years and older members are retired. The purpose of the NCCPC, at least in the Deng Xiaoping era, was to prevent the concentration of power and to institutionalize succession at different levels of the party. While members to the congress are elected, those making it up the ranks are elevated in an opaque system that most Sinologists are still attempting to decipher.

The 19th congress enshrined President Xi Jinping's political thought into its constitution. As is customary, after a first term each Chinese president comes up with his political philosophy that adds a layer to previous such amendments. Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era gets added to Marxism-Leninism, and Mao Zedong Thought. Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao had to be content with the less exalted status of originators of "theory". Other than Xi, six leaders have been anointed, five of them new (and all of them old!). They are: Li Keqiang, 62, premier since 2013, Li Zhanshu, 67, head of China's parliament, Wang Yang, 62, executive vice-premier, Wang Huning, 62, director, policy research office, Zhao Leji, 60, head of the powerful anti-corruption agency, and Han Zheng, 63, Shanghai party chief. Prior to the meeting, there had been speculation that Xi would elevate his protégés Chen Miner and Guangdong party secretary Hu Chunhua, both of whom are in their 50s. It is now believed that Xi has appointed sexagenarians so there will be no challengers when the time comes five years later for a potential and unprecedented third term as president.

Using hagiographic terms for an incumbent president, the resolution passed at the congress states that "under the guidance of Xi's thought, the CPC has led the Chinese people of all ethnic groups in a concerted effort to carry out a great struggle, develop a great project, advance a great cause, and realize a great dream, ushering in a new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics". It emphasizes markets for resource allocation but completely disavows any political competition. Open and shut at the same time.

In recent weeks, there has been much commentary on Xi's centralization of authority. He has declared himself "core" leader. He is also the chairman of the Central Military Commission. In this capacity, he replaced three of the four top generals at the congress and appointed several allies as the new leaders of the military. Nearly 90% of the military delegates to the 19th congress were new.

There are likely to be major strategic implications of this centralization of Chinese political and military control for India and the rest of the world. Xi has already called for a major military modernization plan. Xi's reforms are already underway, with seven military regions being remade into five combat commands. The goal is to make units more agile and war-ready. As one example, China has built its second aircraft carrier and a blue-water navy will set sail in coming years. Xi believes he can close the gap on weaponry with Russia in a decade, and with the US by 2050. This weaponization and modernization will likely trigger an arms race in Asia. With Shinz Abe, an ardent nationalist, just having won another term, Japan is likely to remilitarize. Similarly, with the sabre rattling in the Korean peninsula and US President Donald Trump's inconsistent support, South Korea is likely to weaponize as well. An arms race in Asia comes at an inopportune moment for India. India would have preferred to use its expanding resources to distribute prosperity among

its people. It may have no choice but to increase military spending to maintain balance in Asia.

The uncharacteristic exertion of external influence in the South China Sea and beyond is also a new reality in the Xi construct. If you add the political and security implications from the Belt and Road Initiative, then you have a China not merely focused on its own internal trajectory but keenly projecting that in near and far zones. This could call for India's resources to be diverted away from a necessary focus on structural changes to its economy.

India's intelligence apparatus will have to study not only the likely institutional response of the politburo but the specific personalities of Xi and his appointed protégés. Indian intelligence has historically had a tough time penetrating China's opaque strategy; it will be doubly difficult now. India would do well not to get sucked into a mega race with China on military spending or geopolitics. The best bet for India is a combination of focus on the economy to build resources, and a partnership strategy with Japan and Australia in particular, to hedge against a dramatic erosion in relative position.

P.S.: "Mastering others is strength, mastering yourself is true power," said Lao Tzu. "It is man's own mind, not his enemy's, that lures him to evil ways," said the Buddha.

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