The Three-Body Problem Trilogy: A Reflection of New China under Communism

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Abstract

This article uses Liu Cixin's Three-Body Problem trilogy and other contemporary literature on China as a lens to understand Chinese strategic culture under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its implications for India's evolving security environment. It examines the philosophical and practical dimensions of this strategic culture and suggests ways to address the resulting threats. The analysis identifies several strategic concepts mirrored in both the trilogy and Chinese foreign policy, including the dark forest theory, surveillance and control, patience and deception, existential deterrence, and collective behaviour and mob mentality. From an Indian perspective, the article recommends analysing CCP behaviour as an expression of strategic culture, building institutional memory, developing credible military, economic, and technological deterrence, and recognising that security is 'Never Enough' and is an ongoing process requiring resilience, redundancy, and strategic depth across multiple domains.

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Introduction

India's rise over the last two to three decades has fundamentally altered its strategic environment and the focus of its anxieties. Earlier, public discourse often framed India's problems—terrorism, social unrest, political instability—as the work of an 'External Hand', usually shorthand for Pakistan. Today, while Pakistan remains a concern, the primary axis of competition has clearly shifted toward China, a far more complex and powerful challenger whose ambitions, methods, and worldview demand a more nuanced approach.

The China that India confronts under Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule is not only a neighbour and rival but also a civilisational state that has reinterpreted Marxism as 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics'. This philosophy combines one-party rule with state-led capitalism and long-term strategic planning. Writers such as Vijay Gokhale and others in the Indian strategic community have highlighted how Beijing plays a 'Long Game', blending economic leverage, military modernisation, and psychological signalling to shape its environment over decades.

Yet the Indo–China relationship is not only about present-day rivalry. Historically, India has exercised a deep cultural influence on China—through Buddhism, ideas, trade routes, and intellectual exchange—as richly described by William Dalrymple in *The Golden Road*, his account of the subcontinent's connections with East Asia.[1] Modern Chinese nationalists, however, often downplay or recast such shared heritage, preferring narratives that centre China's uniqueness and continuity.

Against this backdrop, Liu Cixin's trilogy (*The Three-Body Problem*, *The Dark Forest* and *Death's End*)[2] becomes a useful lens to analyse Chinese strategic culture. It is not just a work of speculative fiction but a Chinese imagining—shaped by the traumas and ambitions of the People's Republic—of survival, power, and fear at a civilisational scale. When read alongside Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and modern analyses of Chinese strategy, the trilogy offers Indian readers a way to grasp how 'New China under communism'

might think about the world, enemies and allies, and the cold calculations required in a universe it perceives as a 'Dark Forest'.

Introduction to The Three-Body Problem

The Three-Body Problem (TBP) is a landmark science fiction trilogy by Chinese author Liu Cixin, which won the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015[3], first Asian book to achieve the feat, and has a critically acclaimed series of the same name. It has been widely praised for blending rigorous science with large-scale political and philosophical questions. Although the author's relationship with the CCP is contested–in fact some portion of the book and series of the same name generated controversy in China for being critical of the CCP[4]–the trilogy is a useful lens through which to explore how the country's outlook has been shaped under CCP rule.

The story begins amid the upheaval of China's Cultural Revolution, then expands into a cosmic drama in which humanity confronts the Trisolarans, an alien civilisation. The Trisolarans come from a chaotic three-sun system whose unstable environment repeatedly brings them to the brink of extinction. The trilogy explores themes of civilisational survival, ideological struggle, technological acceleration, and interstellar conflict, making it one of the most influential sci-fi works of the 21st Century and a key window into contemporary Chinese speculative thought.

Historical and Ideological Foundations in TBP

The first book opens during the Cultural Revolution, when radicalised Red Guards publicly persecute scientists and intellectuals. This background highlights how ideological extremism, political purges, and suspicion of experts shaped modern China's governing mentality. The trauma of that era—fear, chaos, and the privileging of political loyalty over truth—reverberates throughout the trilogy in the form of distrust, tight control, and an overriding focus on regime and species survival.

The Trisolarans' looming threat and inescapable surveillance through a *Sophon* (a device) resonate with the Chinese leadership's sense of existing in a hostile environment, facing both external

pressures and internal instability, and the perceived need for pervasive surveillance to ensure regime survival. TBP thus transforms specific Chinese historical experiences into a universal story about how civilisations react when cornered. And the Sophon can be read as reflecting the pervasive surveillance that a dominant power may employ to suppress opposition. TBP also deals with the possibility of circumventing such surveillance–a 'Wallfacer' project[5] where strategies are made in the minds of the protagonist, the final domain beyond the reach of surveillance. These strategies are executed by a Swordholder.[6]

In *The Art of War,* Sun Tzu devotes an entire chapter, 'The Use of Spies',[7] to the idea that perfect information is the key to winning without fighting, urging rulers to cultivate multiple types of agents embedded everywhere, including among enemies and *their own people*.

The Dark Forest and the Chinese Worldview

In *The Dark Forest*, Liu introduces the 'Dark Forest' theory[8] - the universe is like a dark forest in which every civilization is a hunter who must hide because discovery may lead to annihilation. The concept echoes the Chinese diplomatic maxim of 'Hiding capabilities and biding time', especially during Deng Xiaoping's leadership, and reflects his cautious view of international politics: never assume others are benevolent, never fully reveal your capabilities, and always prepare for worst-case scenarios.

This also fits Sun Tzu's emphasis on obscuring one's intentions and strengths until the decisive moment.[9] This mindset explains the Chinese preference for ambiguity and indirectness in foreign policy—projecting moderation while quietly building power, avoiding unnecessary provocations, and assuming that other actors may harbour hostile intentions even when they speak of peace.

Patience, Deception, and Long-Term Timing

In TBP, the Trisolarans wait decades to move directly against Earth and use sophisticated deception to slow human progress, including distorting basic scientific research and spreading false theoretical 'Truths'. This long-term strategy of psychological warfare and

technological sabotage aligns with a broader Chinese tradition of strategic patience: accepting short-term constraints to create favourable conditions later.

A real-world parallel is the period leading up to the 1962 Sino-Indian war, when Chinese leaders projected a message of peace and coexistence even while preparing militarily. Beijing continued to speak the language of 'Peace' and 'Friendship' in diplomatic exchanges[10] and international forums even as it quietly massed forces, developed logistics infrastructure, and planned offensive operations across the Himalayas. Indian leaders, reassured by public Chinese statements and misreading the tempo of PLA movements, failed to grasp how far preparations had already advanced.

As later documented in accounts such as *Himalayan Blunder* by Brig JP Dalvi, Chinese forces had pre-constructed prisoner-of-war camps capable of holding thousands of Indian soldiers, redeployed large numbers of acclimatised troops, stockpiled ammunition along the frontier, recruited Tibetan porters, and even positioned interpreters proficient in multiple Indian languages months before hostilities began.[11] The combination of polite rhetoric and quiet preparation can be read as echoing the same pattern seen in TBP—surface calm masking deep planning.

In *Art of War*, Sun Tzu treats deception as the foundation of strategy, urging leaders to appear weak when strong, distant when near, and inactive when ready to strike, turning misperception itself into a weapon.[12] This logic fits closely with both CCP behaviour in episodes such as the 1962 war[13] and the Trisolarans' long campaign of misdirection and scientific sabotage in TBP, where open conflict is prepared under a cover of apparent calm and constraint.

Deterrence and Existential Will

TBP offers a radical model of deterrence. Facing destruction, Earth adopts a 'Dark Forest deterrence' posture, i.e., if attacked by Trisolaris, it will broadcast both civilizations' locations to the wider universe, inviting unknown, superior powers to destroy both of them. This is effectively a threat of mutual annihilation on a cosmic scale. Deterrence works only because both sides fear the consequences.[14]

This logic differs in an instructive way from early Mao-era nuclear doctrine, in which Chinese leaders publicly expressed willingness to accept enormous casualties rather than submit, thereby signalling that nuclear threats would not easily coerce them. In both TBP and Chinese strategic history, the credibility of deterrence comes from demonstrating a readiness to endure extreme sacrifice—deterring stronger adversaries by showing that the *cost of victory would be unbearable*.

History as Narrative and Validation

In *Death's End*, the narrative explains how people often use stories not to gain new strategic insight but to seek confirmation of what they already believe.[15] This tendency maps closely to how the CCP constructs and uses historical narrative: invoking the 'Century of Humiliation' and celebrating revolutionary victory and national rejuvenation as a way to legitimise current rule. TBP's observation that people prefer reaffirmation over uncomfortable truth can thus be read as a subtle reflection on the use of history in sustaining modern Chinese political identity.

In *Art of War*, Sun Tzu stresses the importance of unity between ruler, army and people, noting that a commander must ensure the troops 'are in accord with their ruler'[16] and that their morale is high before battle. In practice, this means telling a coherent story about why the war is necessary, just, and winnable. The CCP extends this logic into peacetime by using patriotic history, victimhood, and revival stories to align public sentiment with party goals.

Arrogance and Survival

A key idea of the trilogy is that weakness and ignorance are not fatal by themselves; arrogance is.[17] Civilisations can survive being technically backward or partially blind, as long as they remain cautious, adaptable, and self-aware. The truly deadly mistake is overestimating oneself and underestimating others.

This aligns with Sun Tzu's insistence that knowing oneself and the enemy is the foundation of victory and that overconfidence leads to ruin.[18] For a rising China, the implied lesson is the need for modesty in posture, realistic self-assessment and constant re-

evaluation. TBP thereby reinforces a core theme of Chinese strategic culture: the greatest danger is overconfidence.

Evolving Enemies and Transactional Alliances

Across the trilogy, the relationship between humans and Trisolarans shifts from uncompromising hostility to conditional collaboration when confronted with higher-level cosmic forces. Alliances are depicted as situational tools rather than permanent, value-based commitments.

This resonates with the CCP's pragmatic foreign policy. China's support for Pakistan against India, despite Pakistan's participation in anti-communist alliances like CENTO and SEATO during the Cold War[19], shows how Beijing can sidestep ideological contradictions when pursuing strategic goals. In this sense, TBP's flexible alignment logic matches a real-world Chinese pattern: 'Friend' and 'Enemy' are variables, not constants.

Mob Mentality, People's War, and Collective Transformation[20]

TBP also explores how collective behaviour can transform human morality. The opening Cultural Revolution scenes show mobs of students and citizens, inflamed by ideology, persecuting and even killing intellectuals. Individual conscience dissolves into collective fervour, and a group of people becomes a distinct, often more ruthless actor than any single person. This offers a more nuanced depiction of mob mentality.

This theme recurs in *The Dark Forest* and *Death's End* through the behaviour of isolated starship communities.[21] In *The Dark Forest*, crews aboard 'Escapist' or wandering ships, cut off from Earth and faced with limited resources, collectively decide to attack or destroy other human ships to secure their own survival. The decisions made by vote create a chilling picture of democracy under existential fear.[22]

In *Death's End*, a human 'Vagabond' ship that chose to abandon Earth in a previous crisis is later lured back under false pretences, and its crew is tried for crimes against humanity.[23] Here, both the original escape and the later deception and judgement[24] reveal how 'Collectives' redefine loyalty and treason, and how

majorities can recast survival choices as moral crimes once circumstances change.

These episodes show that when groups act under stress, they can become something qualitatively different—colder, more calculating, more willing to sacrifice outsiders or dissenters for collective survival. The trilogy thus dramatises the psychological and moral mechanics of mob and mass behaviour.

This directly connects to communist notions of 'People's War',[25] in which political and military struggles are waged by mobilising the masses as the primary force in protracted warfare. In Maoist practice, mass campaigns—whether against class enemies, during the Cultural Revolution, or in other movements—channelled collective energy to reshape society's direction. TBP suggests both the power and danger of such mobilisation: once activated, a crowd or a polity can endorse extreme measures, from purges to betrayal, that individuals might resist on their own.

How this analysis can help in International Relations with China

Strategic Culture

A useful way forward for engaged with the CCP in international relations is to treat its behaviour as the product of a strategic culture, much as C Christine Fair does for Pakistan in *Fighting to the End.*[26] In that book, she argues that Pakistan's military elite—and through them, much of the state and civilian strategic discourse—operate within a worldview in which resisting India's dominance is itself 'Victory', regardless of material cost. This *strategic culture* shapes not only the army's war-fighting choices but also the narratives that are internalised by large segments of the civilian population and political class, who repeatedly return to confrontational policies even when they are economically or diplomatically damaging.

By analogy, any serious strategy toward China must start from an understanding of the *CCP's strategic culture* rather than assuming it will behave like a typical status quo power i.e. a realist or an idealist. China's strategic culture draws on communist ideology, the 'Middle Kingdom'[27] civilisational narrative, Confucian moralism, a siege mentality about encirclement, and a strong realpolitik instinct.

Liu Cixin's TBP universe, when read together with this behaviour, suggests a CCP strategic culture with certain especially important features relevant to foreign policy:

- **Centrality and phases of interaction**. Communist China sees itself—as in both traditional 'Middle Kingdom' ideology and TBP's civilisational logic—as a central actor whose primary task is to survive, endure, and eventually shape the environment around it.[28]

- **Patience and timing**. TBP's Trisolarans, and Earth's later Dark Forest strategy, embody extreme patience and careful sequencing; they wait for the right 'Window' before acting decisively.[29] Modern Chinese doctrines like *tao guang yang hui*[30] (hide capabilities, bide time) and later 'Peaceful Rise' rhetoric resonate with the same phased, timing-sensitive approach. If this is correct, then the key to dealing with the CCP is not to expect linear, transparent behaviour, but to 'Catch China in the right phase of interaction'. Vijay Gokhale in his book *The Long Game,* painstakingly explains in detail the frustrating nature of Chinese negotiators.[31] He emphasise the need to build institutional memory of Chinese interactions and understanding long-term strategy, and cautions against interpreting short-term silence as acceptance of India's position.

In military terms, this may mean a sustained buildup of capability and intelligence with a forward-looking strategic mindset. Studying Chinese philosophy and communist ideology separately is important to understand which strand of Chinese strategic thinking is being addressed. The opponent has shown a tendency to alternate between the roles of a champion of people's war and a defender of an ancient civilisation. Recognising the distinction between these approaches and responding appropriately to each would be a significant step.

Deterrence

Deterrence emerges as another crucial thread linking TBP and CCP practice. In the trilogy, deterrence is not just about possessing destructive capability but about how credibly a side signals its willingness to use it and accept the consequences; Earth's Dark Forest deterrent works because it convinces Trisolaris that humanity will risk mutual annihilation rather than submit.[32] Mao's approach to nuclear deterrence followed a related but distinct psychological logic: publicly dismissing fear of nuclear strikes by insisting that people's war would continue even after the loss of major cities, while at the same time relentlessly pursuing China's own nuclear capability to ensure it could not be coerced or ignored.[33]

In recent years, China has experimented with new forms of economic coercion beyond military power, notably signalling potential leverage over rare earth supplies in disputes with advanced economies, including the United States[34] and Japan.[35] These episodes illustrate that Beijing views critical economic and technological chokepoints as tools for shaping adversary behaviour, much like strategic weapons. For other states, especially India, the TBP lens suggests two imperatives: first, to identify what forms of deterrence can be credibly brought to bear on China—whether military, economic or technological—and second, to anticipate how the CCP's strategic culture will interpret and respond to those deterrent signals. Understanding both sides of that equation through game theory, is essential to avoid miscalculation in a real-world 'Dark Forest' where misread deterrence can trigger the very escalation it aims to prevent.

When Enough is Enough

Security in the TBP universe, as in real geopolitics, has no end state; it is an open-ended pursuit where 'Enough' is never truly enough. In *The Dark Forest*, Earth's most advanced space defences and deterrent systems are destroyed in moments once a superior force decides to act[36], underscoring how quickly painstaking security architectures can be rendered obsolete by qualitative shifts in capability or intent.

Taken together, these examples highlight a hard truth that TBP dramatises on a cosmic scale: security requirements expand with context, threat perception, and technological change, and cannot be 'Completed' in any stable, permanent sense. There is always another layer of vulnerability, another dependency, another domain—space, cyber, critical minerals, sea lanes—where a state can be surprised or coerced. The bottom line is that security is an ongoing process of adaptation and prioritisation rather than a fixed end state; accepting that it is 'Never Enough' is not a counsel of despair but a reminder to build resilience, redundancy, and strategic depth into any long-term defence.

Conclusion

This article attempts to show that in international affairs, Chinese realism is a sharp reflection of the Dark Forest theory. The historical aspect of people's war, and existential aspect of 'Socialism with Chinese Character',[37] is a veil that needs to be kept in mind while dealing with the CCP. The Three Body Problem trilogy is a seminal work which is a reflection of these characteristic and a code breaker of how to deal with such a problem. The reader is left to consider how such patience and concealment might be interpreted and countered.[38]

Endnotes

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