



The 19th Congress and Xi's Rise: Implications for India

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'Strategy 17 “抛砖引玉” - Tossing out a brick to get a jade’ - Prepare a trap then lure your enemy into the trap by using bait. In war the bait is the illusion of an opportunity for gain. In life the bait is the illusion of wealth, power, and sex.

---Chapter 2, 36 Strategies of Ancient China²

The 19th Congress

The recently concluded 19th Congress has thrown up a conundrum; while Xi Jinping seems to have followed the extant convention in retiring his anti-corruption Tsar, Wang Qishan, due to his age, yet in all else he has followed no convention having filled up the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), the Central Military Commission (CMC), and the Politburo with his chosen allies, ***and not brought in anyone from the 6th Generation as nominee(s) for succession in 2022.*** An apt example of the above quoted strategy. Seems he has utilised it to circumvent the inner party tussles, thereby enabling his firm grip on the Party.

With his thought – ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era’, now part of the constitution as Xi’s Thought, he is now as strong as, if not more than, Chairman Mao. It remains to be seen whether he would be anointed as the Chairman in the National Peoples’ Congress in Mar2018.

‘Strategy 1 “瞒天过海” - Deceive the sky to cross the ocean’ - Moving about in the darkness and shadows, occupying isolated places, or hiding behind screens will only attract suspicious attention. To lower an enemy’s guard you must act in the open hiding your true intentions under the guise of common every day activities.

---Chapter 1, 36 Strategies of Ancient China³



Though the PBSC appears to be balanced, with 2 members each from Jiang Zheming, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping’s factions (refer table below), there exists a school of thought that these members had accepted Xi as the ‘core leader’ and to abide strictly as per his directions, hence they were not purged. Xi has utilised this strategy intelligently, as he is able to hide his true intentions within the Party, and from the World of how he intends to lead China, **though he has given some new timelines on the route to his China Dream (at some variance to the previous) - become a “moderately prosperous society” by 2020, a “basically modernised nation” by 2035, and a “rich and powerful socialist nation” by 2050.⁵ This further underlines the economic crunch faced by China, as many economists have opined.**

Ser No	Name	Affiliation	Age
1.	Xi Jinping	-	64 years
2.	Li Keqiang	Hu Jintao (CYL)	62 years
3.	Li Zhanshu	Xi Jinping	64 years
4.	Wang Yang	Hu Jintao (CYL)	62 years
5.	Wang Huning	Jiang Zheming (Shanghai Clique)	62 Years
6.	Zhao Leji	Xi Jinping	60 years
7.	Han Zheng	Jiang Zheming (Shanghai Clique)	63 years

Clearly, Xi is a big winner of this reshuffle. He has consolidated his power and elevated his status as a great leader with a new thought for a new era – though some would state that this ‘new’ thought seems more a supplement to Deng’s Theory of ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’. With his allies in the PBSC, the Politburo, the CMC, the Secretariat, and the Central Discipline and Inspection Commission, all of whom now act as checks on each other, he has ensured that none become powerful enough to challenge him. With a strong mandate from the 19th Party Congress and his allies in strategic positions, Xi will make a concerted push to realise his ambitions in the next five years and beyond.

In line with his vision of rejuvenating China and regaining its place as a leading nation in the world, Xi has selected Yang Jiechi, the leading diplomat and Special Representative for Border Talks with India’s NSA, to be part of the Politburo - a first for a Chinese diplomat in nearly two decades. This could reduce the perceived hold that the PLA seemed to have on Chinese foreign policy.

The smaller CMC (refer to the table below) implies a very strict oversight on the PLA, indicating centralised control on all issues at the highest level. Instead of eight regular members, in addition to the chairman and vice-chairman of the 18th CMC, the 19th CMC has only four regular members – a sign of the concentration of decision-making authority in Xi and his few CMC members.

Ser No	Name	Appointment	Age
<u>Chairman</u>			
1.	Xi Jinping	Gen Secy, CCP	64 years
<u>Vice Chairmen</u>			
2.	Gen ZuQiliang	Second Tenure as Vice Chairman	68 years
3.	Gen Zhang Youxia	Ex Director Weapons Development Department	67 years
<u>Members</u>			
4.	Gen Wei Fenghe	Ex Commander PLA RF	63 years
5.	Gen Liu Zuocheng	Director Joint Staff Department	64 years
6.	Adm Miao Hua	Director Political Works Department	62 years
7.	Gen Zhang Shengmin	Director Discipline and Inspection Commission	59 years

This does not match with the philosophy that drove the major military reforms since late 2015. The three key drivers that had been identified were⁶:-

- ✓ Improving the ability to conduct joint operations across multiple domains.
- ✓ Improve supervision over a force seen as increasingly corrupt and undisciplined.
- ✓ Advancing civil-military relations, especially in the defence R&D.

The basic objectives of Xi's reforms since Dec 2015 were twofold: to centralise PLA decision-making in the hands of the CMC and Xi; and transform what has historically been a land-dominated military into a nimble, integrated force.

These are contradictory, as there is a need for greater delegation down the chain if the PLA is to be a nimble-integrated force, i.e., needs to have a directive style of command. Centralisation of all decision making with Xi, in the CMC, implies an autocratic style of command, wherein it kills the initiative down the line and inhibits field commanders from exploiting fleeting opportunities on the battlefield as they wait for orders from above.

Further, by elevating the head of the Anti-corruption Commission as a member of the CMC and relegating the Service Chiefs out of it, XI Jinping has sent a very strong message that he would not brook any challenge to his control on the PLA. This could lead to errors in strategic decision making as the senior staff officers may hesitate to give a contrarian narrative fearing a corruption backlash.

It is worth noting that during the 90th Anniversary of the PLA in Aug 2017, while addressing the troops in Zhurihe Combined Arms Training Base, Xi focused on the party's goal of building a strong military under "the new situation," which he briefly summarized as having three core elements⁷:-

- Building a people's army which obeys the party's command and can fight and win battles and has excellent work style.
- Creating a new military strategic command.
- Developing new military strategies and guidelines.

The tasks given to the PLA by Xi Jinping, while making major structural changes to the CMC and the PLA since Dec 2015, demanded increased levels of joint / integrated training for its operational and tactical units, higher quality of joint Tactical Command, service headquarters, and unit staffs that would be crucial for the planning, command, and control of campaigns. But, the changes to the 19th CMC, which indicate very close oversight, runs contrary to these requirements. The problems envisaged then, that some commanders 1) cannot judge the situation, 2) cannot understand the intention of higher authorities, 3) cannot make operational decisions, 4) cannot deploy troops, and 5) cannot deal with unexpected situations,⁸ would continue for some time more as it seems that the leadership may feel inhibited from such independent decision making, a key requirement necessary to win future network centric hybrid wars.

Concerns for India

There are major concerns for India with Xi Jinping emerging as the autocratic leader of the CCP and the PLA. Xi Jinping has again stressed on the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) as the growth engine for

China. Also significantly, its implementation schedule runs parallel to the Chinese politico-economic vision spelt out by Mr Xi - for Phase I: mobilisation 2013-16; Phase II: Planning 2016-21; Phase III: Implementation 2021-49. Yet the challenges abound as more and more countries are having second thoughts on trading their sovereignty for short term economic gains, a challenge for which Xi does not seem to have any answers at the moment other than soft pedal the issue. Concurrently it would not be missed that Xi had to present a new set of deadlines for the economic growth of China, wherein a new phrase and timeline has been interjected- 'basically modern nation' by 2035. The slippage amounts to almost a decade and a half to his previous timelines. This would lead to aggressiveness along the LAC and the South China Sea and rousing extreme jingo nationalism to divert attention from the internal insecurities.

China under Xi is determined to show the developing and the under-developed nations that a contrarian model to the Western narrative exists for economic and overall growth – socialism with Chinese characteristics. It sees a great opportunity of expanding its sphere of influence in Asia and Africa, amongst the global South, where it could sell this narrative and so realise its 'Dream'. A rising democratic India poses a direct challenge to this narrative.

Thus China would aim to undercut India's growth from within, using its 'deep connections' and create socio-political and socio-economic turmoil to subvert India's steady rise. Concurrently it would utilise its geo-economic squeeze to deny India any economic outreach in the region / the world. China would play both ends of the political firmament in India with the aim of subverting the current and future dispensations, thereby curtailing India's political strength and will. Towards that end, it would commence a 'media, psychological and legal warfare' using its deep connections, with a view to undercut the standing of political parties amongst the masses. It would attempt to create socio-political and socio-economic turmoil, utilising the extant social, religious, and economic fissures. Concurrently it would also strive to undermine the civil-military relations and use media/social media to demoralise the Armed Forces. The overall aim would be to degrade India's Comprehensive National Power in the medium to long term. India thus needs domestic harmony and a bipartisan approach to this challenge with deft aligning abroad and in the Indo-pacific region to construct an effective counter to this challenge.

Concurrently, the challenge from the PLA in the near to medium term would be more in the asymmetric domains since the structure of the 19th CMC does not augur well for delegation of authority to the field commanders. The CMC has been reduced in size and accommodates only Xi Jinping's allies. This implies a greater push for party control on the PLA, with the 'Sword of Damocles' of trumped up corruption charges on the heads of senior PLA commanders should they differ from Xi's views. It would lead to 'mediocracy', as only the politically correct would rise up the ranks. This would pose grave challenges to the PLA in future. Xi could also be exerting such control to weed out the entrenched corruption within the PLA. Hence such disruptive pressures would be necessary for at least the next five years, which implies that it would take more than a decade for the PLA to become a nimble, integrated force.

However, the asymmetric threats from China's disruptive technologies, standoffs along the LAC (including increased use of herdsmen and graziers), and use of proxies to disrupt India's internal security would continue. It could also push Pakistan to raise the ante against India, to force India's hand for a conventional show down – *“Chapter 1, Strategy 3 (借刀杀人) Borrow one's hand to kill / Kill with a borrowed knife”; Attack using the strength of another (because of lack of strength or do not want to use own strength). Trick an ally into attacking him, bribe an official to turn traitor, or use the enemy's own strength against him*⁹, thereby disrupt India's economic rise.

This now provides India with some elbow room, not only for modernisation of its Armed Forces but also for integrated infrastructure development and restructuring of the Higher Defence Organisation. Beyond 2035, by when Xi aspires that China should be a “basically modernised nation”, India would have to contend with a very aggressive China that would not hesitate to resort to use force to secure its ‘claims’. The political hierarchy and the bureaucracy have to realise that economic growth without military muscle will not be in India's interests. Both need to grow hand in hand to ensure a stable and secure India.

With the BRI being the bedrock of his new global commercial and political architecture, the immediate challenge to it that Xi faces is from India and Japan, with their Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, which is a concrete response to it and provides an alternate model with no geo-economic equity squeeze, like China's. Further, the recent landmark electoral victory of Shinzo Abe and his push to revive the quadrilateral – India, Japan, USA, and Australia, marks a new challenge to China's push for a unipolar Asia under its control. The US has also been talking with India and Japan about an overall strategy to provide an alternative to China's BRI and counter Beijing's biggest strategic play. Washington has loudly declared that BRI is nothing but “predatory geo-economics” by another name.

The **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue** (QSD) was an informal strategic dialogue between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India that was maintained by talks between member countries. The dialogue was initiated in 2007 by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, with the support of Vice President Dick Cheney of the US, Prime Minister John Howard of Australia and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India, and was paralleled by joint military exercises of an unprecedented scale, titled Exercise Malabar. The diplomatic and military arrangement was widely viewed as a response to increased Chinese economic and military power, and the Chinese government responded to the Quadrilateral dialogue by issuing formal diplomatic protests to its members. The QSD ceased following the withdrawal of Australia during Kevin Rudd's tenure as prime minister, reflecting ambivalence in Australian policy-Pacific¹⁰.

In the quadrilateral, Australia seems to be a weak link as China could easily apply the geo-economic squeeze on it, again to push it out of this quadrilateral considering how economically dependent it is on China's demand for its resources. It's worth mentioning that China's share of Australian exports have more than doubled, to over 30 percent, since foreign minister Stephen Smith stood alongside his Chinese counterpart to announce that he was dumping the old quadrilateral security agreement in February 2008. It seems that Shinzo Abe's push to add the European Powers to this quadrilateral is to counter this eventuality. ASEAN nations are now more likely to view the resurgence of the Quad as a means of outsourcing hard-power balancing against China without directly incurring China's wrath. The four Quad countries are members of the East Asian Summit and could easily meet on the side lines of the ASEAN-backed meeting. Importantly, the cover of ASEAN centrality needn't be threatened by the Quad should it remain an informal un-institutionalised grouping.¹¹

India should support Shinzo Abe, and work towards strengthening this quadrilateral and its extension with other European Powers, to further the aim of a multipolar Asia in a multipolar world, thereby countering China's push for a unipolar Asia with 'Chinese characteristics'. India should also explore a *'Regional Multilateral Federal Structure'*, encompassing the like-minded South and South East Asian Nations, which should be supported by US and Japan, to provide a similar growth corridor as envisaged for Africa. This regional construct would have economic, commercial, energy, infrastructural, socio-political, socio-economic, and security architectures that would be interconnected to enable and strengthen them to better face the challenges of geo-economic coercion and geo-strategic compulsions.

India thus needs to carefully calibrate its response to this emerging challenge that China will pose. It needs a bipartisan approach that should provide internal harmony and stability, military modernisation, and an integrated multi-purpose infrastructure grid to counter internal and external threats to India's sovereignty. Internally India needs to carefully calibrate its approach to ensure a transparent and equitable growth across the extant social, religious, and economic divides. A firm and mature handling of the divisive forces would be the need of the hour, along with a pro-active counter-narrative for perception management in the print, electronic, and social media to blunt attempts at fomenting internal turmoil.

It should prepare itself for likely aggressive posture by China in all domains, as Xi pushes to achieve his Dream, by getting into alliances with like-minded countries to further India's 'core national interests'. India should push for a regional structure that would facilitate economic growth, stability, and peace by integrating the following:-

- Maintaining an integrated infrastructure and energy grid to facilitate economic integration.
- Maintaining a common integrated domestic base for economic, socio-economic and socio-political strength.
- Maintaining an integrated geo-political and geo-strategic balance.
- Better managing the open International Trade and Multilateral regimes.

Such a system would provide not just security architecture in military terms, but a 'net security architecture'. As China, under Xi, pushes to create a unipolar Asia with Chinese characteristics and thereby provide an alternative autocratic governance model for economic growth, such a Regional Structure would provide a contrarian narrative to the Chinese model to usher in a new era of growth with shared democratic norms. It would lead to multi-polarity within Asia, act as a succor to the smaller nations, and ensure that rule of international law, good governance, equality, transparency and economic prosperity for all is ensured within the region.

End Notes

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