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## This Election Season, What Do Indian Political Parties Say About China?

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*India sees China as both threat and positive model, but poll manifestos have very little on how to deal with Beijing. The evasion is reflective of the unwillingness by successive governments to thrash out China policy in the open.*

China is the primary foreign policy and security challenge that India faces in its neighbourhood. Alongside New Delhi's apprehensions is a fascination in sections of the Indian political elite for the way China has grown its economic and diplomatic heft. China is a reference point – a model even – to benchmark and achieve domestic economic and political goals.

Yet, in manifestos across political parties, there is a striking lack of deep engagement with China, India-China relations, and the Chinese economic model. National security challenges are more directly addressed, but here too, there is much evasion.

### China as security challenge

India-China relations in the recent past has been a series of mixed – and missed – signals. The Chinese – well aware of the Bharatiya Janata Party's popular image as the political party strong on Indian national security issues – nevertheless assumed that Prime Minister Narendra Modi would be open to doing business in the Gujarati way. For what it was worth, they decided to choose one stereotype over another.

Modi appeared equally keen to base the relationship with China on sounder economic engagement. He also seemed to think that pushing closer ties with the United States would not bother the Chinese. He also continued the previous government's policy of remaining implacably opposed to Chinese president Xi Jinping's pet Belt and Road Initiative on account of it passing through Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir.

Leave alone any ideas on how to deal with an increasingly assertive neighbour, the BJP manifesto actively evades the issue.

The BJP government ought to have recognised the qualitatively different nature of China after Xi ascent to power in 2012. Multiple Chinese transgressions on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) since 2013 should have made that clear. Yet, the Modi government proceeded with the so-called 'informal summits' in 2018 and 2019 with the general elections that year sandwiched in between. The summits were intended to reduce bilateral tensions, but they clearly did nothing of the sort. Chinese transgressions in eastern Ladakh started a few months later in April 2020 and eventually led to the clash and fatalities at Galwan in June.

Four years on, the BJP manifesto shows no progress on thinking on China. Leave alone any ideas on how to deal with an increasingly assertive neighbour, the BJP manifesto actively evades the issue. Only indirectly does a reference to the issue come in when the manifesto declares if elected, it will 'accelerate development of robust infrastructure along the Indo-China [...] border areas' (p. 38). (It is worth noting that 'Indo-China' is a term used for mainland Southeast Asia. Its incorrect use to denote the borders between India and China is a telling sign of inattention from a party whose government has a former foreign secretary as its external affairs minister.)

The Congress brings up China upfront in its section on 'National Security', saying the 2020 LAC incidents "represented the biggest setbacks to Indian national security in decades". It promises a new 'comprehensive national security strategy', including greater institutionalisation of national security decision-making processes and accountability to Parliament (p. 38). The party accuses Modi of giving "a clean chit to China" in his 19 June 2020 statement to an all-party meeting, denying the Chinese had entered or captured Indian territory. The Congress claims this has "considerably weakened our negotiating position [...] Despite 21 rounds of military-level talks, Chinese troops continue to occupy Indian territory and deny Indian forces access to 26 out of 65 patrolling points, equivalent to an area of 2,000 square km in eastern Ladakh" (p. 38). (The information on the denial of access to patrolling points comes from an internal presentation at a meeting of police chiefs, later leaked to the press.) The Congress manifesto also notes that the "Chinese buildup in Doklam" – seen as a victory for the Indians when they forced the Chinese to vacate the area of confrontation in 2017 – continues (p. 38).

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As an opposition party, the Congress would find it easier to make strong assertions about what it would do with respect to China. However, the Congress’ prescription of “quiet attention to our borders” contradicts its stated position of ensuring accountability (p. 40). Indeed, transparency has never been the Congress’ strong suit when it came to foreign policy in general, and China policy, in particular. The language in the Congress manifesto is the sort of bureaucratic speak that has for long kept China policy out of the realm of public debate. While the present government has made mistakes on China policy, its mistakes have been clearly visible in the public domain, even if unintentionally so.

Neither the Congress claim that it “will work to restore the status quo ante on our borders with China and to ensure that areas where both armies patrolled in the past are again accessible to our soldiers” nor its promise to ‘take the necessary steps to adjust our policy towards China until this is achieved’ come with any details (p. 40). This is a surprising omission for a political party that has been in power at the Centre for so long and has more experience dealing with foreign policy and China than any other political party.

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China policy under both the BJP and the Congress has been reactive. This approach – ‘masterly inactivity’, as some might put it – has let the Chinese set the pace on border transgressions as well as how any forward movement might be produced. The series of Chinese transgressions especially since 2013 and the long-running military-to-military talks following the Galwan crisis are cases in point. Meanwhile, Indian official and non-official engagements with China saw an uptick from late last year as the general elections neared. The economic relationship continues to thrive with China regaining top spot in the list of India’s trading partners earlier in May.

India’s hedging behaviour is also visible when it comes to a public confirmation of the challenge posed by China. Even as S. Jaishankar, the foreign minister, claims that the India-China relationship cannot get back to normal without disengagement and de-escalation on the LAC, he seems to put the onus on China than on the Indian government to proactively change the situation. India also has had a go-slow approach in the QUAD, strenuously denying a military objective or identity for the group. Indeed, the grouping is engaged in more non-traditional security domains, which important as they are, do nothing to deter the Chinese in the present. The Americans have, therefore, preferred to work through groupings such as AUKUS and a new security quadrilateral involving Australia, Japan, Philippines and US – dubbed the ‘Squad’ – to signal deterrence and military intent to China in response to the latter’s aggressiveness in the South China Sea.

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This is a continuation of an approach over the last decade, where successive governments have believed the time is not yet ripe for India to actively work against China and that it lacks any real capacity to change the situation on the ground. The Indian foreign minister in an interview pointed out his and India’s helplessness, given the larger size of the Chinese economy compared with India’s. While Home Minister Amit Shah has claimed at multiple recent election rallies that India would “take back” Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir, no politician has talked about taking back lost territory from the Chinese. The rhetoric on Pakistan could also be read as an attempt to distract from China and the government’s inability to achieve much forward movement in talks since Galwan.

Reading between the lines of the BJP manifesto, it is clear that India’s approach will continue to signal confusion to its neighbours on what, if any, challenge China poses to its security interests. China itself will perceive that New Delhi will not or cannot put pressure on the bilateral relationship beyond a point.

A distinct voice on China might have offered smaller parties opportunities to draw attention to themselves and to set the terms of the debate over foreign policy in the domestic space. It is potentially a low-cost and high-impact exercise. This is especially relevant for parties based in states where international engagements and decisions have a greater impact: border states, or states that are economically connected to global trends.

Only three smaller political parties take up China: Trinamool Congress, Samajwadi Party, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]. All of them are constituents of the opposition INDIA bloc.

The CPI(M) does not appear concerned with the lack of progress in bilateral military-to-military talks on disengagement and de-escalation along the LAC.

Trinamool, in power in West Bengal, links the crisis of Doklam to security in the state's northern borderlands and beyond: "Indifferent to BJP's rhetoric, China has continued its military and infrastructure buildup in Doklam, jeopardising the security of the Siliguri corridor and the Indian mainland's connectivity to the northeast" (p. 56). It notes the incursion in Galwan and faults the central government for failing to deter China. "Despite 21 rounds of high-level talks, Chinese troops continue to boldly occupy thousands of kilometres of the Indian territory" (p. 56).

The Samajwadi Party clubs China along with Pakistan in a single line in its manifesto, calling for strengthening of border security and no tolerance for incursions and terrorism (p. 17).

The CPI(M) too has a single line, calling for a "negotiated settlement of the border dispute with China and promotion of all round relations" (p. 24). While this position is in line with the party's position over the years for peace and tranquillity between India and China, the CPI(M) does not appear concerned with the lack of progress in bilateral military-to-military talks on disengagement and de-escalation along the LAC. When viewed on a larger canvas, the CPI(M)'s positions are symptomatic of its reticence and discomfiture in taking positions that are critical of the Communist Party of China, which it sees as a fraternal party.

### China as economic role model

Foreign policy and security considerations are not the only way China intrudes in Indian policymaking and imagination. China's shadow or influence is less tangible and more indirect, but certainly present on issues related to economic policy or ambitions.

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China is something of a positive model for both the BJP and Congress in the development models they espouse. Beijing's successes in opening up its economy to investment by foreign and diaspora capital, its central position in global supply chains and its gradual move up the value chain for both goods and services have inspired similar ambitions in India of becoming a 'manufacturing hub', 'major player', or 'global leader' in one sector or the other. The red carpet laid out for big foreign investors like Foxconn or Elon Musk, for example, is to replicate developments in China, as is the increased competition among different Indian states for these investments and brands.

The Chinese party-state's support for large public and private enterprises and its massive infrastructure expansion projects over the decades finds reflection in the BJP manifesto. The party speaks of plans for expansion and upgradation of transport and digital infrastructure and energy security (p. 45-49). The BJP's call to "develop industrial cities in different industrial corridors for balanced regional development" (p. 42) is also very much of a piece with the Chinese development logic that tries to answer regional inequalities with more development rather than an examination of the development model itself.

A 'China model' for India's economic policy – one in which improving 'ease of doing business' is the preferred approach.

Modi's response to the question of rising inequality in India – that those who got richer would keep carrying the poor up along with them – recalls Deng Xiaoping's famous dictum, "Let some people get rich first" (*rang yi bufen ren xian fuqilai*). As in China though, rise in prosperity across the board will coexist with rising inequality, which will be significant and damaging to India's social fabric.

A 'China model' for India's economic policy – one in which improving 'ease of doing business' is the preferred approach rather than addressing fundamental and structural economic problems – risks creating some of the same challenges that China faces today.

Like China, India too faces a challenge of creating quality employment opportunities for its 12 million odd who enter its labour market every year. While Beijing has addressed the issue with greater political intervention, Indian political parties remain hazy. The BJP's

manifesto acknowledges the issue with its promise of enhanced employment in manufacturing with schemes to support ‘the entrepreneurial potential of our youth’, by expanding “credit programmes [...] in starting and sustaining their ventures” (p. 19).

What is more akin with the CPC is how the BJP deals with data on jobs and other statistics that can make the ruling regime uncomfortable. China has [stopped publishing employment data](#) citing issues with measurement while the BJP-led government has [frequently challenged unemployment statistics](#) put out by various Indian agencies.

Like the CPC in China, various political parties in India see economic policy and instruments as a way of ensuring regime survival.

The Congress, for its part, has mentioned the creation of ‘an employment-linked incentive scheme for corporates to win tax credits for additional hiring against regular, quality jobs’ (p. 32). But by and large, its manifesto lacks the detailing required to give shape to or implement policies.

The CPI(M) considers the growth model of the Chinese party-state as something of [a model to be emulated](#), if one goes by its economic programme in Kerala, the only state that it governs, and by its public pronouncements that [literally copy](#) Chinese propaganda. Reading what its manifesto says – or actually, *does not say* – the CPI(M) is clueless about the growing contradictions and contentions in China – from widening inequality and unbalanced development, and China’s emergence as a stout defender of capitalist globalization to the political disenfranchisement of labour, oppression of ethnic and religious minorities, and the absolute centralisation of power by Xi (It must be noted that this has caused the CPI(M) rank and file to be more willing to [criticise](#) the CPC and its policies than their leadership).

Like the CPC in China, various political parties in India see economic policy and instruments as a way of ensuring regime survival. When central and state governments forge direct links with the general public through direct benefit transfers, the objective is to [tie public goods to particular individuals or political parties](#) rather than promote them through the strengthening and deepening of government institutions and processes. The accompanying risk also has a Chinese parallel. Increasing centralisation of economic policy instruments and resources – underway in India for some time – will only increase the ability of the central government to put pressure on or arbitrate between state governments.

## Conclusion

Following the Galwan incident in 2020, India’s northern neighbour has noticeably taken over from Pakistan as the greatest security concern for India’s professional security planners. The ‘new Cold War’ too has raised the stakes for the economic rivalry between India and China.

Broader developments are poorly reflected in the manifestos of India’s political parties.

The heightened tension is visible when differing opinions and dissent in India can now be criminalised under the label of being [pro-Chinese or promoting Chinese interests](#). Even minor faux pas by the opposition have been picked up by the BJP to [extract political and electoral advantages](#). Meanwhile, the happenings in eastern Ladakh four years ago have imposed [serious costs](#) for Chinese investments and companies in India, in the form of greater scrutiny, [punitive actions](#) and the need to ‘Indianise’ their management and operation structure.

Yet, the broader developments are poorly reflected in the manifestos of India’s political parties. When the shadow of China falls on the election discourse, political parties see China not just as a security challenge and rival, but also as a source for policies they think can be applied productively to India’s own growth story. A further possibility is that political parties can use these policies or extend such learning to shape domestic politics in ways they can control.

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As India’s global weight grows and as its international standing becomes a matter of domestic conversation, one would anticipate greater attention from political parties’ manifestos in addressing India’s foreign policy challenges. Indian citizens too ought to be concerned about the impact of international crises – the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas conflicts, for example – and events with

cross-border effects – such as fairness in trade, remittances or climate change.

Yet, it is seldom these issues that interest India’s electorate and political parties’ poll propaganda, except when they come in the form of ties with neighbouring countries. While Pakistan can often be a major topic at the hustings, it makes its entry not as a foreign policy issue per se as much as a code for domestic discourse.

Even if China is not actively discussed in these Indian general elections, its impact on Indian interests and policymaking is likely to grow and should not be underestimated by the electorate.

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