

**India's China Challenge** by Ananth Krishnan, Noida:  
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Ananth Krishnan's book, *India's China Challenge*, is a notable examination of the challenge posed to India by the meteoric rise of China. Krishnan's stay in China as a journalist for *India Today* and *The Hindu*, from 2008 to August 2018, and his knowledge of the Mandarin language have greatly enriched the depth of his examination of the subject. During his stay in China, he travelled to all but three of the country's 33 provinces and regions, the China–India border in Tibet and Xinjiang, and the trading markets and factories of Guangdong. His conversations on contemporary issues with Chinese citizenry, while travelling the length and breadth of China, are delightfully interspersed throughout the book and add great value to the narrative. He paints a picture of China that is vastly distinctive from the unidimensional impression portrayed by the mainstream Indian media.

The book is divided into six parts and an epilogue. It begins with an examination of the political challenge of dealing with a one-party state and transitions to an examination of the economic challenge, analyses India's difficult diplomatic and military engagement with China, visits the challenges of unresolved historical issues, questions the validity of conventional thought on China, and ends with portraits of six Chinese acquaintances defying traditional Chinese convention.

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\* The reviewer is presently serving in the Indian Navy. The views expressed here are his own.

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Krishnan examines the political challenge of dealing with a one-party state by highlighting the centrality of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the 'beating heart' of the so-called 'China model'. He argues that the survival of the Party is deeply entrenched within the idea of China, much like an omnipresent God, who is everywhere, yet can't be seen. The centrality and the survival of the CCP is underwritten by the Party's vice-like grip on the people, propaganda and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The PLA's allegiance to the Party, and not to a state, is a crucial guarantor of the survival of the CCP. The quest to preserve the legacy of Mao underwrites the legitimacy of the CCP. Krishnan presents a rather emotive tale of how China glosses over Mao's failure during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, while continuing to safeguard the non-negotiable nature of his tenets.

Krishnan's investigation of the political and the economic challenges posed by China's rise are particularly striking for their depth and balance. He captures the rise of Xi Jinping and chronicles his ruthless consolidation of power within the CCP. He provides a gripping account of Xi's efforts at suppressing dissent within the Communist Party, and chronicles the slow but steady elimination of his competitors. He argues that Xi has imbibed vital lessons from the disintegration of Soviet Union to prevent a recurrence in China. Some of these are the necessity of the Party's control over the army and active resistance to Western-style political reforms creeping into China, while remaining wedded to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Krishnan opines that the changes made in the Xi era are fundamental to the survival of the CCP and the professed 'Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' is the fourth phase of the CCP's evolution, centred on the transition from 'getting rich' to 'becoming powerful'.

The author also chronicles the deep penetration of Chinese manufacturing in the daily lives of Indians. He highlights the lucrativeness of 'make in China and buy in India' as a business proposition. As per 2019 figures, India imports more goods from China than any other country, totalling \$75 billion out of the bilateral trade of \$93 billion. He calls out the challenges of boycotting Chinese goods, as trade with China is deeply entrenched within the Indian manufacturing ecosystem and its scope is not limited to toys. While highlighting the differences in the economic paths of China and India, he cites numerous pluses from the Chinese system that could be remodelled to the Indian context, such as economic entrepreneurship and decentralised control. Krishnan argues

that China's economic rise was unique to its condition at the time and as such, replication may not be feasible in the rapidly shifting global economic atmosphere; nevertheless, Chinese foundational policies in health, education and rural reforms might be worth emulating. He highlights the challenges faced by China in its wholesome embrace of urbanisation and the growing clamour for a more equitable urbanisation process if the idea of a China of big cities of the future is to succeed. He describes the giant technological leaps made by China and its emergence as a competitor against the United States (US), positioned on the 'Made in China 2025' plan. Krishnan highlights the worrying scale of Chinese investment in India and warns about the strategic nature of Chinese investment and urges greater attention to broad-based regulatory mechanisms. However, he also highlights the possible benefits of harnessing Chinese investments as many Chinese companies have already invested large sums based on a long-term positive outlook of the Indian economy.

Krishnan notes that Deng Xiaoping's maxim of '*tao guang yang*', which means 'bidding time, hiding brightness', appears to have been shed under Xi's reign. The use of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a Chinese vehicle of diplomacy, showcasing the so-called 'Chinese model' as a solution for countries abroad, is unprecedented. He further observes that BRI also has a domestic context that seeks to address the challenge of transformation of the country's economy from manufacturing dominance to services. There are murmurs within China that the growing debt burden of BRI may be evidence of Beijing overextending itself. He offers a rather complete account of BRI, while reiterating the Chinese ambition of building a world order focused on the primacy of China.

Krishnan argues that China and India view each other differently and this inconsistency lies at the core of the competition between the two countries. India sees China as an equal, while China abhors such an equality. He laments our historical failings in understanding China and posits that the unresolved history of both boundary and war are fundamental roadblocks in the resolution of the India–China boundary dispute. He offers a unique insight on Chinese perception and position on the boundary dispute and outlines possible options of settling the dispute before its ossification in public memory and political discourse. Krishnan hints at the opportunities of settlement that we have allowed to slip by and suggests that the settlement of the boundary issue might reduce Pakistan's prominence in China's foreign policy. His perspectives

on the slow churn and the likely tipping points within the Chinese society are educative and highlight the challenges of governing a country as vast as China. However, Krishnan also shatters the myth of a dark and dysfunctional China, emphasising that Chinese citizens enjoy a better standard of living than Indians do, and their daily lives are devoid of the struggle for the basic amenities, albeit at the cost of freedom of expression and other civil liberties.

Krishnan completes the book with sections based on his observations from his travels to Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The last section of the book paints vivid portraits of people who have interacted with him during his stay in China, offering rare Chinese perspectives on contemporary issues of China. He cautions against the monochromatic stereotyping of 'the Chinese'. He observes that although China's one-party authoritarian rule stifles public expression, the Chinese society possesses a layered diversity of views and beliefs. In the epilogue, he provides an account of Chinese management of the Covid-19 pandemic. He posits that post-Covid-19, the CCP seems to have learnt that greater control is the need of the hour, and it realises that it needs to push back as the nature of outbreak of the pandemic has fuelled global questioning of the robustness of the so-called 'China model'.

Krishnan's command over the subject is apparent as the book courses seamlessly from one section to another. His style is engaging and analysis is sharp. His examination of history, particularly on Sino-Indian border dispute, is nuanced and scholarly. He takes the reader through a complex subject with consummate ease and lucidity. The book fills a void in the understanding of China from an Indian perspective and very deftly separates hyperbole from practical measures that could address the China challenge. He does not stand in judgement of China's rise but urges a better understanding of its consequences specific to India. One of the unique strengths of Krishnan's book is his ability to capture both sides of the coin, such as the strengths and the drawbacks of the so-called 'Chinese model'. In many ways, his book triggers the re-examination of our most deeply held conventional Indian wisdoms on contemporary Chinese issues, such as the so-called peaceful rise of China, dealing with one-party rule in China, managing China's diplomatic reach and economic influence, the boundary dispute and historical misgivings. His book stands tall amongst similar works of notable Western academics and is worthy of a place on the reading list of avid China watchers and Indian policymakers.