

## India's China Challenge: A Journey Through China's Rise and What it Means for India (Ananth Krishnan)

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**Ananth Krishnan. *India's China Challenge: A Journey Through China's Rise and What it Means for India*. (India: Harper Collins, 2021)**

'India's China Challenge: A Journey Through China's Rise and What it Means for India' is an exemplary examination of the factors that have contributed to the rise of China's power and the challenge this poses for its neighbour, India. What makes this book different from other commentaries on Chinese political, economic, and diplomatic features is the author's interactions with various Chinese locals, authors, journalists, and activists, including those who have been exiled from the country for a myriad of reasons. These personal accounts have enabled him to paint such a nuanced picture of the experiences of the Chinese citizenry under leaders like Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping, among others, all of whom have had a significant impact on the lives of the Chinese people. The author also adds various observations that he made while travelling across the country, along with his interpretation of the events that have led China to become the power it is today.

The book is divided into six parts titled, 'Politics', 'Economy', 'Diplomacy', 'History', 'Frontiers', and 'Portraits' and into 24 further chapters, ending with an epilogue. The First part of 'Politics' gives us a thorough overview of the domestic changes that eventually led to Xi Jinping's ascension to power and how he consolidated his power to reach the position he commands today. The author gives us an insight into what the Chinese people went through during the Great Leap Forward, the subsequent famine, and the Cultural Revolution. We get to know about how the Tiananmen Square incident led to economic reforms and the opening up of the country, as well as the effect it had on educational institutions. The author has highlighted important documents like 'Document Number Nine' that find little mention in mainstream media but give a clear idea of the direction China was heading under Xi. Finally, we also get a brief idea of the organisation of the political institutions in China as well as the various phases of the Communist Party's evolution. Reading the book, one realises that even though China, as a whole, has undergone drastic changes since Mao, the basic

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underlying ideology, or the guiding principle, of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has remained unchanged.

In the Second part, 'Economy', the author illustrates the fact that China's economic success was the result of a centralised, efficient, and heavy-handed state, capable of carrying out the execution of huge infrastructural projects at a rapid pace during the 1990s and the 2000s. While this is common knowledge, the author then shares a lesser-known fact that China followed an exactly opposite model in the 1980s, one that was guided by greater decentralisation and bottom-up economic entrepreneurship to propel economic growth. We get a glimpse of how Deng Xiaoping created a business environment through reforms that were previously impossible under Mao. However, these reforms were not easy to implement in the conservative country, especially after the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. The author has emphasised the importance of China's accession to the WTO and the abundance of cheap labour in the 'China Model'. While China is famous for its cheap labour, we learn about the Chinese investments in vocational training in rural areas, along with health and education, that enabled it to have such a large, skilled labour force. At the same time, the author has emphasised China's centrality in the regional and global supply chains and what it means for India. He focuses on the unique factors that have led to China's manufacturing success-factors that cannot be replicated anywhere else in the contemporary world, making China's story one-of-a-kind. The author highlights the important contribution of China's local governments in its policy formulations and human capital investments, which have paved the way for the formation of China's strong manufacturing base.

Part Three on 'Diplomacy' begins with the author asserting the 'power of ideas', wherein Xi has created a narrative about the inevitability of Chinese supremacy in his campaign for the BRI projects around the world. The author points out the Chinese strategy of using the ambiguity of the BRI projects to its advantage. He explains how Chinese strategic thinkers have been looking at the long history of China to draw lessons for the country's strategic thinking today. The book then progresses to give an overview of the Indo-China relationship along with a detailed account of their ongoing border disputes. It covers the diplomatic visits of President Xi Jinping to India in 2014 and that of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to China in 2015 and sheds light on the Chinese acceptance of the formation of the government by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), in 2014 because it felt that the BJP was easier to deal with than its predecessors. The author has covered the Doklam crisis of 2017 and the recent Galwan clashes of 2020 and has scrutinised the behavioural shift of the two neighbours over the years, culminating in an amiable relationship under Xi and Modi. The book postulates that the increasingly deepening China-Pakistan relationship is arguably the biggest military and strategic threat to India. It is here that the reader realises that Ananth Krishnan's writing is insightful and analytical when talking about the implications of the border dispute and the various factors involved in it.

Part Four of 'History' discusses the events that led to the Indo-China War in 1962 and its inevitability, considering that both nations had contrasting perspectives on the border issue. The author emphasises how the issue could have been easily resolved through negotiations earlier, but

the situation has become much more complicated now and cannot be resolved through mere border talks. The people, media, and other actors have come to attach their sentiments to the dispute, which has complicated the issue significantly. Part Five, 'Frontiers', covers the controversial regions of Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong, where the author paid personal visits. He also sheds light on the protests in Hong Kong in 2019 and 2020 and their ramifications, not just for the SAR but also for regions like Taiwan. The reader learns how the protests in Hong Kong gave new ground to pro-democracy parties and revitalised Tsai Ing-Wen's political campaign in the Republic of China (ROC).

In the final part of the book, Part Six, on 'Portraits', the author gives us an account of seven Chinese acquaintances who defied conventional Chinese traditions. Each chapter is dedicated to one individual, and the author denotes them by the following names: a discoverer of temples; a treasure hunter of scriptures; an interpreter of poetry; a cultural ambassador building bridges; a soldier turned green warrior; and a dreamer who chases her unlikely passion fearlessly. The author even attempts to break the myth prevalent in the public discourse that 'all Chinese think alike' or that China is a monochromatic monolith, and he does so by highlighting the diverse perceptions and lives of the Chinese citizenry.

Ananth Krishnan is regarded as the most authentic interpreter of Indo-China relations, and his knowledge of the Mandarin language has enriched his exploration of this complex relationship. It is his examination of the historical, economic, political, and strategic factors shaping this relationship that makes this book an impeccable read. In this book, he analyses the impact of China's growing power on India's economic, political, and strategic interests in the world and gives us a glimpse of the challenges and opportunities that any cooperation between the two countries can bring. The book attempts to give us a glimpse of the on-ground reality in China in an objective and unbiased manner from someone who has extensively travelled the country and mingled with the locals. At the same time, Ananth Krishnan has very rightly pointed out the fact that for a country that is considered the biggest strategic threat to India, the latter invests little in understanding its domestic politics and daily on-ground developments. He points out how Indian news channels, which blast China on their channels all day long, don't even bother to send a correspondent to the country to cover the latest developments there. His disappointment with the Indian media is based on the notion that to understand China, its actions in the international arena, and, most importantly, its politics, one needs to pay more attention to what they say at home, especially when they don't say the same thing abroad. Finally, this book covers both the opportunities as well as the challenges that the 'China model' has brought for the Chinese people. Overall, this book is a good read for anyone who wants a holistic understanding of China, its domestic politics, its foreign policy, and the events that underlie the strenuous relations of one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world, that of India and China.