

Understanding China – The Missing Link in India's Policy Introduction

India and China are two of the world's oldest civilizations and modern nation-states with shared borders, similar demographic pressures, and overlapping development ambitions. Yet, despite being neighbours and competitors, India's understanding of China remains shallow and fragmented. While India is steadily building military and economic capabilities, a critical gap persists – the lack of sustained investment in knowledge about China's history, politics, language, and society. The absence of deep expertise makes India dependent on external narratives and vulnerable to misjudgements in policy.

India and China – Civilisational Parallels

India and China have interacted for more than two millennia. Buddhism travelled from India to China and shaped East Asian civilisation. Chinese travellers like Fa-Hien and Xuan zang documented India's society, economy, and culture, which today serve as valuable historical records. Both countries are continental-sized, diverse, and populous, grappling with similar challenges of poverty reduction, industrialisation, urbanisation, and inequality.

In the modern era, both nations were subject to colonialism and humiliation – China under Western powers and Japan, and India under British rule. Both societies emerged with strong nationalistic movements that prioritised sovereignty and development. These civilisational and historical parallels make China a natural comparative mirror for India, offering lessons in successes and failures.

India's Current Understanding of China – A Weak Link

Despite these deep connections, India's institutional understanding of China is extremely limited. Today, most of India's knowledge of China is reduced to troop movements on the border, trade imbalances, or official statements. The rich complexity of Chinese politics, society, culture, and governance is often overlooked.

For example –

1. China's "Century of Humiliation" (1840s–1940s) continues to influence its foreign policy outlook.
2. The Maoist revolutionary legacy shapes how the Communist Party operates internally.
3. Confucian ideas still inform governance and social behaviour.
4. China's techno-nationalism under Xi Jinping combines ideology with advanced digital surveillance and state capitalism.

Without serious study, India risks reducing China to stereotypes or superficial markers, making informed policy impossible.

Why Understanding China Matters for India

1. **Strategic Importance** – India and China are direct competitors in Asia, and understanding China's motives is vital for defence, diplomacy, and economic security.
2. **Economic Lessons** – China's journey from poverty alleviation to becoming an \$18 trillion economy offers lessons in industrial policy, infrastructure, and technology. Its missteps in over-urbanisation, debt, and environment are equally instructive for India.
3. **Foreign Policy** – A nuanced understanding helps India navigate its position in multipolar forums like BRICS, SCO, and the UN, where China often plays a decisive role.
4. **Domestic Relevance** – Chinese records also contain information about India's own history. Engaging with these sources can enrich Indian historiography.

China Studies in India – Inadequate and Security-Heavy

India has only about five or six centres focusing on China, concentrated in Delhi and a few major cities. They are chronically underfunded and dominated by a security-centric view, with little investment in language training, historical research, or cultural studies.

By contrast –

1. The US has embedded China Studies across disciplines in major universities.
2. Australia, though less directly threatened, has robust China research centres.

3. In India, very few universities offer Mandarin training, and almost no fellowships encourage deep immersion in Chinese archives or universities.

This inadequacy makes India dependent on Western or foreign interpretations of China, weakening its ability to craft independent narratives.

Necessity of Expertise

Building China expertise is no longer optional — it is a strategic necessity. A secure nation must act from knowledge and foresight, not insecurity. For this, India needs –

1. **Language proficiency** – Rigorous Mandarin training for students and policymakers.
2. **Interdisciplinary scholarship** – China must be studied not only through security but also history, politics, sociology, economics, and culture.
3. **Accessible resources** – Translation of Chinese primary sources into Indian languages for wider audiences.
4. **Localised expertise** – Centres in border states like Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Ladakh can provide unique ground-level perspectives.

Government Measures So Far

1. The MEA's Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS) and a few think tanks engage with China, but capacity is limited.
2. Sporadic student exchange programmes exist, but they lack long-term immersion.
3. The New Education Policy (NEP 2020) highlights the importance of languages and global understanding, but does not specifically prioritise China.

Overall, measures remain piecemeal and security-driven, rather than systemic and academic.

Suggestions for the Future

1. Establish well-funded China Centres across major Indian universities with interdisciplinary faculty.
2. Launch fellowships for Indian scholars to study in Chinese universities and archives.
3. Integrate China Studies into Political Science, History, Sociology, and Economics curricula.
4. Promote translations of Chinese sources and research into Indian languages.
5. Develop state-level hubs in border states for local expertise and policy input.
6. Institutionalise policy-academia linkages, ensuring policymakers draw regularly on expert scholarship.

Conclusion

India's future engagement with China cannot rely on short-term optics or reactive policies. It requires deep, independent knowledge of China as a civilisation, society, and political entity. Investing in China Studies is not just about understanding a competitor — it is about building the foresight and confidence of a rising nation.

For India to act from a position of strength, it must invest in nurturing experts who can interpret China's policies, history, and culture with nuance. Only then can India shape a balanced and independent approach to its most powerful neighbour.

Main Practice Question

1. "India's engagement with China often remains limited to border disputes and trade imbalances. Critically examine why building deep expertise in China Studies is essential for India's strategic, economic, and academic future."

Answering Guidelines

Introduction (50–70 words)

1. Begin with India–China as ancient civilizations and contemporary competitors.
2. Mention that relations today are shaped not only by security concerns but also by deeper socio-political, cultural, and economic factors.

Body (multi-dimensional analysis)

1. **Civilisational & Historical Parallels**

1. Buddhism, ancient exchanges, Chinese records of Indian history.
2. Shared struggles with colonialism and development.

2. **Current Gaps in India's Understanding**

1. Few China Studies centres (5–6, Delhi-centric).
2. Security-heavy lens, lack of language training, poor interdisciplinary approach.
3. Dependence on foreign scholarship.

3. **Importance of China Expertise**

1. **Strategic** – Managing border disputes, decoding Chinese Communist Party politics.
2. **Economic** – Lessons in poverty alleviation, tech, industrialisation; avoiding China's mistakes (urbanisation, environment).
3. **Diplomatic** – India's position in multipolar world, BRICS, SCO, UN.
4. **Academic** – Chinese sources vital for Indian historiography.

4. **Government Measures & Limitations**

1. Think tanks like ICS, sporadic exchanges.
2. NEP 2020 emphasis on global studies but no dedicated China focus.

5. **Suggestions**

1. Establish well-funded China Studies centres across universities.
2. Fellowships for immersion in Chinese archives/universities.
3. Translation of Chinese texts into Indian languages.
4. Local expertise in border states (Arunachal, Sikkim).
5. Stronger policy–academia linkages.

Conclusion (50–60 words) – Understanding China is no longer optional but a strategic necessity. True strategic autonomy lies in building our own intellectual capacity, not relying on foreign interpretations. India's ability to engage confidently with its most powerful neighbour will depend on the foresight gained through knowledge.

