

■ COMMENTARY

The CCP at 100: Can it lead China to be the wave of the future?

By Eugene K B Tan

A CENTURY ago this month, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded in Shanghai – not just as a political party but also as a revolutionary movement.

At various points since 1921, the CCP was regarded as the wave of the future in the mass movement endeavour to set China right and on the path of ascendancy.

As the CCP marks its centenary on July 1, China's sphere of influence is now global, shifting the tectonic plates of geopolitics in unprecedented ways.

China now grapples with its putative superpower status amid an international environment that is ambivalent, wary or even fearful of its rise.

Undoubtedly, the domestic and international cohere intimately China's quest for security, order, prosperity, and recognition.

As China rises, will the party-movement, entrench China's commitment, influence, and identity as a respected member of the global community?

Geopolitical challenge like no other

China is already the world's largest trading nation-state, wielding enormous influence on other economies as an important source of investments, aid, and technology.

In a little over one generation since Deng Xiaoping unleashed economic reforms in 1978, China is on track to overtake the United States as the largest economy within the next decade.

In the emerging global order, en-

abling sustained and meaningful co-operation and healthy competition between the US and China is the foremost geopolitical challenge.

Unfortunately, what emanates from the corridors of power in Washington's Beltway and Beijing's Zhongnanhai is an apparently determined disavowal of any possible convergence of national interests and strategic objectives.

Whether it is strategic security, global trade, or multilateral engagement on key issues of the day, the mindset appears to be one of a zero-sum game.

Put simply, bilateral ties between both powers are patently lacking in trust. The US sees China as being bent on undermining, if not destroying, the American-inspired *status quo* that has maintained relative peace and stability since the end of World War II.

China, on the other hand, sees the US using its incumbent dominance to prevent China's peaceful rise, even as it also strives to undo past national humiliations.

In these volatile times, it is necessary for the US and China to avoid the "Thucydides Trap", first identified by the ancient Greek historian Thucydides in his account of the Peloponnesian War: "... the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable."

Graham Allison, founding dean of Harvard's Kennedy School, notes that in the past 500 years, there were 16 cases of a rising power that threatened to displace the incumbent power. Twelve of these ended in war.



Chinese characters reading "Always follow the party" illuminating buildings during a light show marking the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party party in Beijing on Saturday. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

As China challenges America's predominance, misunderstandings about each other's actions and intentions can be deadly. Both countries must avoid sleepwalking to an unwanted and catastrophic war between them.

Any war between them is a tragedy of epic proportions; any victory is pyrrhic and will instead spawn even more disequilibrium and fuel enmity.

Finding convergence

Sino-American interests and priorities do not diverge as it has been made out to be. At its core, both seek to provide a better life for their people and to craft an evolving global order that would enable them to thrive and buttress their security.

Both share an aversion to war and desire recognition for their domestic and international achievements and global roles they play.

While their methods and ideological bases obviously differ, mutual respect is critical if either is to influence and nudge the other to recognise and understand their world per-

spective.

This is important even if acceptance of the other world's view will take longer. What is under-appreciated is that security for either country will not be realised if the other feels insecure.

Determined efforts must be channelled towards policies, institutions, norms, and cooperation that seek to incrementally enhance security and cooperation for both countries even as they robustly engage each other on the issues.

China's rise was facilitated by being plugged into the multilateral system that is undergirded by the US. To keep it relevant and fit for purpose, the US and its allies must be prepared to evolve the system. There is no alternative.

Correspondingly, such systemic evolution will come with responsibilities for China as well. China must also play by the rules even as it seeks its place in the new global order.

A trust- and confidence-building start is for China to robustly engage concerns about her intentions and ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region,

which has the makings of a proxy theatre of aggression, confrontation, and conflict for the US and China.

In turn, care must be taken to not interpret every Chinese act of assertion as aggression. Moreover, any containment strategy is not merely an exercise in futility but extremely dangerous.

The US and its allies must resist the temptation of belligerent posturing even if China's intentions may not always be clear.

Sino-American rivalry cannot be reduced to a game of chance. Given the stakes, both countries urgently need to recalibrate their strategic policies and choices.

Deliberation and a focus on the convergence of interests and the long term will be invaluable.

As Thucydides had noted: "The Athenian people, after voting for ferocious action against another city, within days re-debated the issue and voted to reverse their decision".

Tumultuous decades

The CCP's founding was fundamentally about having the Chinese people commit to a cause larger than themselves, leveraging on the appeal of and affinity to collective action and collective justice, which have resonated throughout much of China's civilisational past.

The CCP's past provides insights on its abiding concern of national weakness. The party's first five decades were tumultuous with an internecine civil war breaking out in 1927, and quickly followed by the Sino-Japanese war between 1937 and 1945.

Even the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, which bolstered the CCP's standing, did not put an end to the internal turmoil and trauma.

Mao Zedong's iconoclastic political and social revolution, bookended by the Great Leap Forward (1958-62) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), also wrought an immense human toll and of opportunities forgone in the quest for political hegemony domestically.

The CCP continues to maintain its omnipotent grip domestically. But the perpetual concerns and tensions of governing a vast state with a plural society comprising one-fifth of humanity and its brand of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" persist today. Economic growth versus political control; stability versus chaos; reforms versus *status quo ante*.

China and the US need not be destined to conflict with each other. The first order of business must be to inject trust and confidence into a vital relationship.

China's paramount leader Xi Jinping declared at the Davos Agenda of the World Economic Forum earlier this year that history was moving forward.

The CCP's centenary is an opportune and unique launch pad for China's wave for the future internationally. How it does so matters immensely. And time is of the essence.

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