Chairman Mao’s 120th birth anniversary falls today (26 December 2013).

Events in China to mark the occasion are going to be “solemn, austere and practical”, as per the instructions of the Chinese Communist Party General Secretary and President of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Xi Jinping. The Planned programmes include issuing of commemorative stamps, publication of books, holding of photographic exhibitions and concerts especially at Beijing’s Great Hall of People as well as functions at the revolutionary base at Yanan and Mao’s birth place of Shao Shan.

2. A key question assuming importance on the occasion will be- how the current evaluation of the Chinese authorities on Mao’s role compares with that seen in the past. In this connection, meriting attention are the following three quotes revealing that the PRC has always taken a consistent stand- ‘On the whole, Mao’s contributions outweigh his mistakes’.

“Comrade Mao Zedong was a great Marxist and a great proletarian revolutionary, strategist and theorist. It is entirely wrong to adopt a dogmatic attitude towards the sayings of Comrade Mao Zedong, to regard whatever he said as the immutable truth which must be mechanically applied everywhere, and to be unwilling to admit honestly that he made mistakes in his later years, and even try to stick to them in our new activities. Both these attitudes fail to make a distinction between Mao Zedong Thought - a scientific theory formed and tested over a long period of time - and the mistakes Comrade Mao Zedong made in his later years. And it is absolutely necessary that this distinction should be made. It is true that he made gross mistakes during the “cultural revolution”, but, if we judge his activities as a whole, his contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweigh his mistakes. His merits are primary and his errors secondary”- “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China, adopted by the
Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on June 27, 1981.

“Chairman Mao’s contributions are 70% positive, 30% negative”- Veteran Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, 1981.

“Mao Zedong’s achievements outweigh his mistakes” – as ‘agreed’ by 78.3% of respondents, ‘strongly agreed’ by 6.8%, ‘disagreed’ by 11.7% and ‘did not know’ by about 3% - Survey conducted by the party-affiliated Global Times, Chinese language edition, 25 December 2013

3. Statements from party leaders, contents of important official documents and details of lead articles that appeared in the PRC’s authoritative media and mentioned below, also confirm the prevailing consistency in China in assessing Mao’s contributions. What looks new, however, is the caveat being introduced of late by the Xi Jinping regime – Do not fully repudiate Mao era policies. This theme is finding a strong echo in China ever since Xi made a demand himself (5 January 2013) that “what was achieved before reforms cannot be denied on the basis of what happened after it and vice-versa”, along with a warning that a full repudiation of Mao-era policies could lead to “great chaos under the heavens’. The political significance of the caveat looks beyond doubt; apparently, some elements in the society, nurturing blind opposition to Mao, are coming under the party attack.

4. Reflecting the trend set by Xi Jinping, a full-page write-up in the People’s Daily (8 November 2013), contributed by the party’s historical research institute, asserted that China could only prosper under the party’s leadership and challenged those who “preach the indiscriminate copying of the Western system”. It pointed out that efforts to undermine the party’s legitimacy by “negating” tragedies such as the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, which preceded reforms in 1978, would ‘only sow the seeds of the party’s own destruction’. Calling upon the cadres ‘to uphold and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics, neither walking down the closed and rigid road nor taking the evil road of changing our flags and banners’, it accused ‘enemy forces at home and abroad, of ‘negating’ the period before reform and opening up and ‘demonizing and denying the CCP’s ruling position’.

6. Broadening the attack against those who negate the CCP’s ‘great historical achievements’, was an authoritative article, captioned “Mao denigration driven by political motives” (Global Times, 22 December 2013). Admitting existence of a ‘fierce’ debate currently in the country between those who are loyal to Mao and those who attack him, it observed that even when Mao had already passed away for 37 years, it is difficult to disregard the history of Mao’s era to make a judgment about him, because we are still more or less influenced by his era, and an evaluation of his legacy will be affected by ideologies. Remarking that Deng Xiaoping’s observations on Mao being “70 percent right and 30 percent wrong” represent the mainstream idea about Mao, the Global Times article stated that as the Cultural Revolution faded, most Chinese people began to recognize his mistakes as well as his achievements. It acknowledged that Mao’s personal leadership style had its own limits, which resulted in criticism towards him after his death. A revolution always has its cruel side, as did the Chinese revolution led by Mao. It emphasised that there is no historical or current evidence that is convincing enough to denigrate Mao. Voices that completely deny or support him are both highly polarized. Currently, the demonizing voices are mainly from the West, which criticize China’s socialist
system. The article concluded by saying that those who criticize Mao do so out of political motivations rather than a desire for genuine historical debate and by calling upon China's mainstream society to resist those who try to undermine China's politics in the name of debating history. Another Article (Global Times, Chinese, 22 December 2013) claimed that ‘a small number of people are repudiating Mao, entertaining a childish fantasy’.

7. Also striking is a subsequent signed write-up in the CCP organ People’s Daily (23 December 2013) titled "Mao Zedong and Four Milestones Along the Road to the Chinese Nation's Rejuvenation," that praised Mao’s relationship to the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, the founding of the CCP in 1921, the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, and the reform and opening up drive that started in 1978. It quoted Deng Xiaoping as saying that "we are doing work that was put forward by Mao but he did not do. We are also correcting what Mao did incorrectly, and doing work well that Mao did not do well enough." The article admitted Mao's faults and mistakes, which led to the ups and downs of New China. However, they detracted nothing from Mao's greatness and his contributions.

8. From the foregoing, one can discern a broad picture in the ideological front- the CCP perceives that attempts in the country to completely negate Mao’s role are politically motivated which will go to destabilize the party rule. There definitely appears to be lack of clarity on the identity of those making such attempts and how serious the attempts are. This being so, it is a fact that there is an ongoing debate in China on Mao’s role; some (Du Guang, a former Central Party School scholar) attribute the debate to the failure so far in China to fully account for Mao’s mistakes. In any case, it may be useful to look at the situation from the point of view of political imperatives emerging for Xi. The nuanced stand in favour of Mao taken by Xi Jinping might signal the rising compulsions on him to do a balanced act at this stage in dealing with competing views within the party, in a manner conducive to further consolidating his leadership position. Broadly speaking, an uphill task for Xi will be with respect to striking of much needed balance between his ‘economically liberal’ and ‘politically conservative’ approaches. A pointer to such a situation is the failure during the November 2013 Party Plenum to announce firm steps on political reforms.

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