

India-China Relations Impressions from a Dialogue with Beijing

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There is a perceptible feeling within the Indian policy and academic community about the positive perception of India-China relations underscored by a new spirit of cooperation and engagement on the 60th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. This change is paradoxical coming after a turbulent 2009 when bilateral relations between the two countries touched the nadir on account of negative media reports of border tensions.

This assessment is based on extensive interactions with leading think-tanks in Beijing at the end of March 2010 by a group of senior Chinese experts under the aegis of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, India and the negative impact of media and think-tanks which tended to exacerbate tensions.

Coming in the above backdrop the visit provided a refreshing opportunity to engage the Chinese strategic think-tank community on a host of bilateral and regional issues. The visit is part of a project that aims to develop better understanding and greater cooperation between India and China for a more sustainable relationship that would help shape the Asian destiny over the coming years. Being a Track II process the exchanges were marked by free and candid expression of views by all participants.

The main focus of the visit was to discuss confidence building measures (CBMs) in diverse fields ranging from, strategic relations, maintaining peace and stability along the borders, promoting strategic stability through CBM's in the nuclear field, enhancing antiterrorism cooperation, promoting maritime security and facilitating media and think tank interaction.

The range of CBM's discussed reflected the desire to move beyond the clichés of hostility and confrontation premised in the normal discourse

on India-China relations to a level that promotes better understanding and more cooperative relationship.

I Sino-Indian Cooperation

There was general underscoring of positive and progressive thinking on India-China relations, even as the Chinese acknowledged their neglect in engaging India given their preoccupation with the United States; a shortcoming which they were keen to address. There was also an acknowledgment that China needs to invest greater political and economic capital in further cementing the bilateral relationship including the need to speed-up the process of settling the long outstanding border question and improving bilateral relations including border trade.

The Chinese attempted to contextualise the relationship in the background of the simultaneous rise of both countries and its impact on Asian geopolitics. An often quoted caveat was that the rise would be a long and arduous process where both countries will have to deal with a number of international and domestic problems including economic and political reforms specifically aimed at addressing the social and domestic needs of nearly two billion (combined) people. Therefore, a friendly, peaceful and sustainable neighbourhood was not only desirable but was imperative.

Providing a strategic construct to the simultaneous rise of India and China and the dawning of the so called "Asian Century" the Chinese interlocutors sought to highlight that this shift in global balance of power is unlikely to be easily countenanced by Western powers. Thus both countries are likely to face many global and regional challenges, such as the recent financial crisis, pressures over recent Climate Change negotiations, and the potential role of Western dominated international multilateral institutions and so on. Therefore, being in the same boat in this long and arduous journey the two

countries need to cooperate and support each other.

Providing a perspective of their global engagement some Chinese scholars mentioned that the world according to China encompassed four concentric circles. At the core were big power relations that included the US, the EU, Japan and Russia. An underlying nuance was that India has yet to graduate to this league while China has already arrived. Next comprised countries or what can be called the Chinese strategic periphery, an area of critical importance given the fact that Chinese Han heartland is sandwiched between a narrow coastal belt and a minority dominated peripheral buffer comprising sixty per cent of Chinese geographical space that includes Tibet Autonomous Region and Xinjiang, among others. India is looked upon as an important player in this circle. The third comprised regional actors in Eastern and Southern Asia with whom good and productive relations were important for Chinese harmonious development and conflict prevention. Last were multilateral institutions, including ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3, East Asia Summit, Six Party Talks, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and so on. It was averred that since India was an important player in majority of these concentric circles barring the first; prudence demanded that China must not only engaging India but developing productive and sustained relations with it.

It needs to be underscored that these views and perceptions are essentially those of academics and retired party and People's Liberation Army (PLA) officials, which are not necessarily shared by the current political or PLA hierarchy. They continue to hold on to the view of the China encirclement theory, in which the US, India and Japan are seen as partners attempting to dominate the rim-land through control over sea lines of communication (a virtual Chinese Achilles heel) aimed at geostrategically restraining China.

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Thus Indian military modernization and strategic relations with the US together with growing economic and strategic convergence between India and Japan are seen as part of a grand design of Chinese containment. The salience of this view in Indian strategic and policy discourse is not fully appreciated. There is a tendency to downplay the PLA perceptions overlooking the fact that the PLA is a party organ with strong linkages with the Standing Committee and State Council, through the Chinese Military Commission whose Chairman is the Chinese President.

Basic deduction from the above perspective is that China is likely to finely calibrate its India policy wherein improvement in relations will be shaped by its understanding of India's rise and its geostrategic consequences. Factors that will shape its thinking are India's relationship with major players like the US, Russia, the EU and Japan. Secondly, it will closely look at regional developments particularly those in Af-Pak, relations with Iran, Pakistan and Myanmar, as also dimensions of India's Look East Policy.

II BOUNDARY DISPUTE

No new formulation emerged; repeatedly the onus for its solution was on political resolution. Interestingly the maintenance of an interim status quo on the boundary issue was sought to be presented as a big compromise by the Chinese leadership something that India needed to acknowledge. A suggestion was for building mutual trust and confidence together with good relations as a precursor for the final resolution of the boundary dispute. On our insistence that a lack of progress was impacting bilateral relations and a need to move beyond the Political Guiding Principles for Settlement of Boundary Dispute, to formalising the framework for their implementation (draft available since 2006) leading to delineation of the boundary, was acknowledged by the Chinese.

However, they remained ambiguous and non-committal on the timeframe, there was no attempt to either put a time line or constructive suggestion on its resolution. It appeared that the whole question of boundary resolution is sought to be linked to the larger issue of overall relations and emerging geostrategic perspective and India's role therein as a sort of coercive leverage. In Chinese thinking countenance on this important issue was seen as giving India a premature concession which was wholly unnecessary at this juncture.

The boundary dispute therefore, remains mired in differing political perceptions and no early move

forward is likely. In fact without significant concession from India either on Tawang, Tibet or the Dalai Lama, a substantial move forward seems unlikely now or even in the near future. The issue is also linked to the Chinese perception of India's comprehensive national strength and the manner India leverages the same.

III MARITIME COOPERATION

This appeared as a probable area of cooperation owing to the convergence of interests. Chinese reacted positively to the Indian Junior Defence Minister's suggestion of helping Chinese Navy in securing sea lanes of communication. Chinese however, sought to underscore such cooperation in the backdrop of the inevitability of rise in maritime power of the two emerging powers in Asia; each seeking strategic space in concert with its national security interests. It set to lay down precise parameters of such cooperation, including the following:

- Legitimacy of either side to develop respective naval power and enter into bilateral or multilateral maritime security arrangements to protect their justifiable interests. If India was to seek port facilities and maritime cooperation with Vietnam, China should not be concerned. Similarly China seeking similar facilities in the Indian Ocean littorals should not be seen in suspicious terms by India.
- The notion of seeking military bases however was denied by the Chinese interlocutors. But, a senior analyst from China contradicted his colleague by clearly alluding to the Chinese right to establish bases abroad in concert with its interests and gave examples of Somali anti piracy operations. In his view such bases were acceptable as long as they met three criteria: the need for establishing the same, acceptance by host country and no adverse impact on the security interests of the neighbours. In a sense the proposition was to lay down possible criteria for the Chinese power projection.
- The issue of greater cooperation, transparency and understanding of each other's strategic intention was emphasized, allusion was that such bilateral cooperation should not be against a third party, e.g. Indo-US maritime cooperation to contain China.
- On multilateral cooperation the view was that these are not necessarily overlapping and the other side should not be concerned unless they were specifically targeted against a particular country. Four power quadrilateral

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naval exercises between India, the US, Australia and Japan and Malabar Exercises Bengal were quoted as examples.

- Chinese raised a specific issue about India's stand on maritime disputes, particularly in the South China Sea. A proposition of non-interference in these disputes was made by the Chinese side.

IV STRATEGIC STABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA

On the role of nuclear weapons to maintain strategic stability in South Asia, the Chinese maintained their position on the non-legitimacy of nuclear weapons by non-nuclear weapon states. However, there was an acknowledgment of the de-facto nuclear status of the so called three outliers i.e. India, Pakistan and Israel. A proposal to legitimize their possession was put across in terms of identifying nuclear weapon states within the NPT (reference being to five nuclear weapon states) and nuclear armed states outside the NPT. No explanation emerged as to how this will impact the exiting NPT structure and what this legitimization would result in for the three nuclear armed states outside the NPT. What however was significant was the recognition of the objective reality of the existential international nuclear order and dealing with the same, something which groups like International Nuclear Non-Proliferation, Disarmament Commission and Global Zero were attempting to address in the run-up to the NPT Review Conference.

The Chinese took exceptions to the propositions relating to developments in their nuclear doctrinal thinking, particularly in its evolution from existential to minimum and now toward 'limited' effective nuclear deterrence. They strongly negated the allusion of Chinese nuclear weapons targeting India and even to any suggestion of Sino-India nuclear arms race. Chinese maintained that their nuclear capability was solely US centric and that it believed in credible deterrence based on the doctrine of No First Use (NFU). They took pains to clarify that China will only use nuclear weapons post absorption of a first nuclear strike. In a sense their emphasis was more on deterrence to prevent escalation rather than war fighting. Their

effort remained focused on small but functionally effective and credible strategic capability.

They categorically emphasised that nuclear weapons will never be used against India while downplaying Indian nuclear capability, which they said was at an 'embryonic' stage in comparison to that of China. They expressed concern over the sub-continental arms race and about the safety and security of nuclear weapons particularly those of Pakistan. They also questioned security of Indian weapons in the backdrop of growing Naxal violence.

V AF-PAK REGION

On developments in the Af-Pak region a broad view that emerged was of growing Chinese concern over the deteriorating situation. Interestingly, despite Pakistan being at the centre of these developments they were not willing to hold Pakistan responsible but rather saw it as a victim. They appeared convinced that the US is unlikely to resort to a premature pullout from Afghanistan. The target date of mid-2011 was seen as more of a political statement to appease domestic sentiments rather than a deadline for withdrawal. Americans will at best do a symbolic pull out next year with the bulk of forces remaining engaged. In their perception, more than anti-Taliban operations the need was for comprehensively addressing the issues of governance, reconstruction and ethnic reconciliation.

On the issue of moderate Taliban their view was that the main actors contributing to deterioration of the situation were not Taliban alone but other extremist or militant groups, such as the Haqqani group, Hizab-e-Islami and other splinter groups and warlords, as well as organised crime needed to be taken into consideration. The dominant view was that there are no moderates within the Haqqani Group or Taliban; both are ideologically radicalized nationalist groups fighting for their homeland. Three factors were seen as supporting the resurgence of militancy in Afghanistan "money, ideology and nationalism." A regional approach based on common consensus was suggested to stabilize Afghanistan, however China remained averse to the idea of troop deployment in Afghanistan either as part of a regional initiative or under UN mandate.

The spill over of turbulence in Afghanistan into Central Asia remained a matter of concern particularly in the ethnically sensitive region of Xingjiang. On developments in Xingjiang a view was that the Uiyghur ideology was slowly losing traction and refuted the notion of recent riots

being the result of colonial oppression and 'Han' racism that erupted in rebellion. According to a Chinese expert, rioting was not caused by locals of Urumqi, but by exiles from Kashgar and Hetian.

VI MEDIA HYPERBOLE

There is no doubt that anti-China stridency in Indian press did affect public perceptions and in a sense put the Chinese government on the back foot as it tended to take off the veneer of harmonious development. This resulted in a massive back lash from the state controlled Chinese media. The wide spread anti-India coverage in the Chinese media indicates the official consent, if not patronage. This coupled with rising nationalism highlighted the potential road blocks in the India-China relationship.

VII CONCLUSION

In most cases, there was an attempt to reduce differences and enhance the space for cooperation. Chinese side suggested a three tier engagement. At the South Asian level they recommended an India, China and Pakistan Track II dialogue to put regional issues in perspective and narrow down differences. At the surrounding areas level they suggested strengthening the existing India-China-Russia dialogue and at the international level proposed an India-China-US Track II dialogue to remove misperceptions emerging out of Indo-US relations.

What needs to be underscored, is the fact that the Chinese did not concede on any of the contentious issues. The impression was that China still does not see India anywhere close to its league, both in stature and influence. Full recognition will only come if India were to develop strong economic and military power backed by political resoluteness to pursue its interests. Though there is recognition of a latent power potential, hence the logic of remaining engaged with India.



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