



India-China Relations Negotiating a Balance

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Now that Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to India in Nov 2010 has ended, it is necessary to reflect on the nature of India-China relations and where it is headed. Kishore Mahbubani, the distinguished Asian thinker from Singapore, described India-China relations as, "the most important bilateral relationship of the 21st Century". Indeed, historically, civilizational, from the perspective of economic benefits to the region or from peace and security in Asia and the world; this is a relationship that is likely to shape the global future.

There is no scope for mistakes. Two large nations that are simultaneously reemerging at a rapid pace, thus this relationship has to be based on carefully balanced enlightened self interests. To achieve this will call for delicate negotiations based on our respective genius, taking account of our differences, yet accommodating the genuine concerns and interests of both. It is important to be clear that tension and conflict, easy to generate in an atmosphere of fear and distrust, can do immense harm to all.

I INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS HISTORICAL & CULTURAL LEGACIES

Historically near neighbours, India and China had very little contact or understanding of each other. Two long but intermittent periods in early history may be considered as exceptions. One was the epoch of the Nalanda University in India, which flourished nearly two millennia ago and brought the world's scholars to its gates. This was amongst the biggest confidence building measure in the history of Asia. The other was

through the Great Silk Routes emanating from China with some branches passing through India and going to the world, enriching both countries. This was an early example of globalized commerce that benefited the entire then known world.

The absence of recent contact failed to develop in India an understanding of the "Middle Kingdom". On its part China has never quite grasped the importance of democracy, pluralism and diversity of India, which with all its imperfections, constitute the quintessence of the Indian state and its nationalism.

Instead, our awareness of each other in modern times can be traced to the 19th Century, where it was coloured by colonial influences with their national interests firmly centred in European capitals. This brief interlude in history was the only period when neither India nor China was a leading nation in the world with neither in a position to shape its own destiny. Yet, it may be argued that spared outright conquest, Beijing secured its national interests somewhat better than Delhi. Many of today's problems originate from that period, even though goodwill between both nations remained intact. Examples from India were Rabindranath Tagore and Dr Kotnis.

In his highly controversial first visit to China in 1924 Tagore said at a lecture in Shanghai, "I want to win your heart, now that I am close to you, with the faith that is in me of a great future for you, and for Asia, when your country rises and gives expression to its own spirit -a future in the joy of which we shall all share." Tagore visited China purely as a poet, yet his words set the tone and trend for India-China relations till the 1950's. Premier Wen Jiabao hit the

right note, when in his first engagement in Delhi in 2010 he visited a school named after Tagore and drew attention to the renewed attention in China today to his humanistic writings.

Congress Party sent a small medical mission led by Dr Kotnis to help the Eighth Route Army in its War of Resistance in 1938. This team's dedication and service to the People's Liberation Army left a deep impression in the minds of the members of the Long March generation. This was the backdrop in which Nehru reached out to China in the 1950's.

A rude awakening to the Cold War realities of the 20th Century came about in the deteriorating relations in the end of 1950's and to the 1962 War. The impact of this was different in the two countries. In China the average citizen had little knowledge of this War. They were in the grip of a totally controlled media. Besides, the population at large was grappling with life and death questions of the consequences of the Great Leap Forward. But, the impact in India was traumatic. Essentially it transformed in to a deep sense of betrayal at several levels, a sentiment that left deep scars.

This contrast was reflected personally to me in June 1991 in many places in China where as a General Officer of the Indian Army and as the first Indian military guest of the PLA in over three decades, one was repeatedly accosted with the statement; "there are a thousand reasons why we should be friends and none at all why we should be enemies". This was a sentiment that few would have shared in India at the time.

As a first step in reconciliation we need to put this current history firmly behind us. This possibility was

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brought home to me personally through a brief encounter in Vietnam in the autumn of 2010. Shocked to see the utter devastation caused to innocent Vietnamese civilians in the most massive bombing in world history, in the deep underground bunkers north of Ho Chi Minh city, we asked if it was possible to forgive an enemy that caused these horrors. I was struck by the response of the young Vietnamese guide. He said; "If we were to hate the Americans, then how can we not also hate the French, the British, the Australians and the Chinese? We need to put history behind us if we hope to build a future".

Many would object to this idealistic approach to hard issues of national interests and they have a point. But, continuing with historic animosities is not the best foundation for national policy. In the realpolitik world of the 21st Century we will need to carefully craft a balance between our concerns and interests and evolve a cooperative relationship.

II THE NEED TO CHANGE MINDSETS

The litany of issues between us is long and complex. A short paper such as this will only indicate broad approaches that India should adopt on some of the more important issues.

The border issue easily heads any list and is also the most urgent. Even though no shot has been fired in anger across the Line of Actual Control since the last twenty six years, an unresolved border can no longer be 'left to the next generation' to resolve. Already more than a generation has passed since Deng Xiaoping's statement and this generation has not proved wiser. There is too much at stake today to pend this issue for long. Lingering problems tend to fester and often can be brought to light from hidden memories to buttress misgivings on other issues. Political sensitivity of this issue to both India and China however, has to be accepted and haste has to be made even if slowly.

The fundamental reality about borders in the 21st Century is that none can be changed arbitrarily between two sovereign nations of some consequence without causing great destruction. Copious blood has already been shed over this

border and today both nations have substantial nuclear weapons as well as conventional arms capability to persuade us to rule out this option. If that much is accepted, the only option that remains is a negotiated settlement. There is no doubt that each side should be prepared to make substantial compromises. But, the framework of a settlement has already been agreed in 2005 at Premier Wen's last visit in 2005 under the Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question. This clearly rules out the possibility of exchanging populated areas.

While there may be concerns today to make the borders porous, access to holy lands and pilgrimage places should have easy though controlled access. This will address so called claims based on religious sentiments. Fortunately most places along our common borders are uninhabited and hence minor changes in lines drawn on maps should have easier chance of acceptance.

The question of the Kashmir border with China has caused recent concern in India. This need not really be the case. Once again on the Jammu & Kashmir question the position of both India and Pakistan has evolved. An exchange of territory, howsoever desirable to either side is not a realistic and even a desirable option. Hence converting the de-facto to de-jure is the issue between India and Pakistan. This will also have to be the option between India and China. This would require a leap of faith and bold political leadership.

Admitted that such leaps are not the preferred options for realistic politicians aspiring to return to office a background of trust and friendship has to be created. Which in turn should be based on carefully crafted win-win situations for both. This is where other major approaches become important.

India-China relations today have to evolve in a substantially altered environment. In the current era comprehensive national power is a factor of economic growth and potential. In this China is way ahead of the rest and forging ahead rapidly. The excuse that India's economic growth story started 13 years later and hence only two decades old and hence catch up with China soon, does not carry conviction. China has in

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these last three decades gone way ahead of India and the rest of the world. Today, China is four and a half times richer than India and the difference shows. Whether in domestic infrastructure, or international reach and goodwill, or in its ability to project power far from its borders, this lead is impressive. Yet, such asymmetries can be overcome through alliances and partnerships. Possibility of conflict can be reduced through developing interconnectivity and trade and commercial interdependence. In both areas substantive progress has been achieved by New Delhi.

The real truth is that India has to get its act together, not merely in catching up in GDP growth, but in translating this in to core national power that can impact on the region and the world. Present strategy then has now to be based on consolidating our immediate neighbourhood and developing selective major power relationships that will translate in time to global influence and political strength. This is the real meaning of 'balance' in strategic relationships and has to be pursued with great patience and foresight, but with single minded zeal.

There are serious obstacles along the way. Our strategic culture of not looking beyond the immediate future precludes effective long term planning. Delhi has always defined its strategic interests in vague principles and ideological terms and not through practical achievable time bound objectives. This needs to change.

Beyond our neighbourhood we have to develop closer ties with major powers such as the US, Australia, Japan and Korea, key democracies with shared values. This will call for a clear break with

our past practice of non-alignment and solidarity among the weak. India, as a strong power in its own right, has the responsibility to assume today the leadership of the medium powers and an alignment with the strong.

Yet, our bilateral relationship with China has to be firmly grounded in a cooperative, constructive and comprehensive relationship. That is again critically important to develop balance, particularly with China, long imbued with the sense of Middle Kingdom. Even as China begins to adjust to a reality of equal and sovereign powers, New Delhi has to exploit openings that may emerge. China's incursion in to India's strategic space, should be met not by lamenting over this fact, but through calm and carefully constructed counter measures in China's periphery.

III CONCLUSIONS

Many options may not indeed be feasible at the present time. For example nothing can reduce the utter dependency of Pakistan as a client state of Beijing, to which it has surrendered its sovereignty. But, this does not apply to its other neighbours, such as Myanmar, Nepal or Bangladesh or other Southeast Asian countries.

This brings us back to the larger issue of bilateral relations between India and China. Lack of knowledge of the 'other' breeds mistrust and leads to fear. We need first to bridge the enormous divide and gap in mutual perceptions. This can be brought about mainly by a very much enhanced people to people contact, knowledge of each other's cultures and history. Not just tourists and visitors, but scholars and young people must enormously increase their contacts in sports, cultural activities and through education in each other's countries. India needs to match the capabilities of Beijing's Confucius Centres. There is an enormous amount to learn from each other and without giving up our basic advantages of a more intimate knowledge of the global language, we can continue to enhance our knowledge of each other.

Next is in the areas of trade and commerce. As China's living standards rise the pay and perquisites of its workers will have to rise in

commensurate manner to ensure social stability and its competitive manufacturing advantage will diminish. Instead of Bangladesh, Vietnam and the Philippines benefiting from this development, India is better poised to exploit this advantage. Some simple but fundamental changes to labour laws and ways of doing business in India will have to change and could make all the difference.

The final factor in achieving a balance is in the area of military capability and deterrence. It is not the most critical issue today to develop a dominance in military capability. For, force today is of diminishing value, except where it serves the purpose of deterring the intention of another to cause you harm. Therefore, an asymmetric but effective deterrence utilizing select capabilities can achieve greater dividends. Such a deterrence potential has to be developed not only in a strategic sense, but also in tactical capabilities. This will have to be in areas of advanced scientific areas; such as in space, under sea warfare capabilities, maritime surface attack, cyber defence and rapidly deployed special forces.

Indeed, India and China has lived close to each other throughout history, as different civilizations, with distinct identities and simultaneously as leading global powers. Yet, it has no history of either permanent animosity or of conflict. That is a lesson from history that we need to replicate. It may be argued that in the intensely globalizing world and diminishing distance there is today a fundamental difference. Yet, our civilizational experience has also taught us to settle our differences through carefully balancing each other's concerns and interests and through that process ensuring a peaceful strategic environment in Asia and the world.



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