The New Helmsmen to Steer the Sino-Indian Ship from Conflict to Cooperation

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Abstract

The recent visit of the Chinese President Xi Jinping has created a lot of euphoria about the prospects of improving strained Sino-Indian relations. Both the countries are headed by new leadership and is easier to bury the troubled past and make a sincere effort to breathe a fresh air into the strained relations. Perhaps Xi's visit to India has taken place at the right time. Narendra Modi's recent visit to Japan and the upgradation of bilateral relations to 'special strategic and global partnership' with the pledge by both the PMs to strengthen economic and security ties, is definitely a no feast to the eyes of Chinese leadership. China troubled by strained relations with its East Asian neighbours couldn't afford to ignore the deepening relations between Japan and India. The Sino-Indian experts expressed optimism over the chances of China wooing India to prevent the growing proximity between India and Japan. It is expected that India could use the Japanese card against China. However, a sober analysis of Chinese president's speech and a few bilateral agreements signed wouldn't hold out much promise to bonhomie between the two countries. The author would look into the circumstances that inhibit improved relations in the immediate future and suggest policy options to warm up the ties.

Introduction

The recent visit by Xi Jinping, the Chinese president to India has evoked mixed responses from analysts. They have largely focused on existing concern's talks on settling the boundary issue; the willingness on the part of china to support India in its thirst for its status as a global power; India being edged out of the emerging multi polar world order by its next door neighbour, china. These concerns ignore the complexity of the relationship because it concerns each of these interconnected elements.

Before we look into the present complex relationship between the two ancient giants, it would be pertinent to have a glimpse of the history of Sino-Indian relationship: from conflict to cooperation. During the 1950's the relationship between India and China were cordial, based on the peaceful co-existence, but the Tibet issue, followed by a border dispute poisoned the climate of Sino-Indian association. Nehru's policy of no-dispute and no-negotiation policies finally led to a border war in 1962. From then on, Sino-Indian relations entered an era of a cold war which lasted nearly 20 years. However, during the era of Rajiv Gandhi (1988), the tension between the two countries was minimised and initiatives were taken for improvement in their relations. Since the end of the cold war, the relations between the two countries have steadily improved, and also strengthened in various fields of mutual interest. The continuous visits between the heads of states and officials have strengthened the relations and various issues including the border issue have been in discussion for resolution by mutual cooperation. The visit by prime minister Man Mohan Singh (2008) brought a new direction in the bilateral relations [1].
The summit between Modi and Xi has recognised that the border is undemarcated and the principles for settling the boundary agreed in 2005 have been reiterated detailing the steps for a final settlement, now described as a strategic goal. A settled border will enable us to review our military doctrine of fighting on two fronts and divert much needed resources for infrastructure development [2]. Unfortunately the latest intrusion at eight points in Chumar is very unusual as it coincided with Xi Jinping’s visit. This intrusion is qualitatively different from earlier intrusions. Four boarder flag meetings at the rank of brigadier and major general have failed to resolve the situation. It is unprecedented for an intrusion to continue during and after the visit to India by the China’s highest ranking leader and chairman of its Central Military Commission (CMC) and suggests it is a deliberate, carefully calibrated military action [3].

There has been a qualitative change in the PLA’s military activities since 2000 with intrusions becoming deeper, longer in duration and involving larger numbers of personnel. The frequency of intrusions in Ladakh’s Chumar area has also increased since 2010-11.

One clear message is that issues of sovereignty and territory are non-negotiable and would triumph any other consideration including economics.

While some Chinese and pro-China individuals argue that the visit is overall a success and the incident on the border shouldn’t be exaggerated, other reports suggest Xi Jinping’s grip on the PLA is weak. One palpably unacceptable report on September 19, 2014 claimed that Xi Jinping has assured Modi the previous day that he has instructed the PLA forces to withdraw. Another recent report disingenuously suggested that on return to Beijing, Xi Jinping had summoned PLA commanders and urged them to follow orders. Actually, Xi Jinping had met senior military leaders to finalise promotions to the CMC [4].

However, the border intrusions should not blind us to appreciate the study growth of economic ties, trade and two way investments between China and India. China is now one of India’s largest trade partners where as India is China’s largest trade partner in South Asia. According to statistics released by China’s ministry of commerce, bilateral trade between the two countries reached $66.47 billion in 2012, China’s export to India was $46.7 billion and China’s import from India was $18.8 billion, falling by 10.1%, 5.7% and 9.6% respectively from the year before. India had a deficit of $28.87 billion in its trade with China with an increase of $1.79 billion from 2011. Chinese’s companies had signed contract projects to an accumulated amount of $60.131 billion with a turnover of business of $33.518 billion by the end of 2012. In two way investments, the Chinese ministry of commerce have approved or put on record $725 billion of direct investment from china in non-financial projects in India. Indian companies had actually invested $486 million in 800 non-financial projects in China by that time. This indicates that despite the negative impact of overall international economic environment and growing trade frictions between the two sides, Sino-Indian trade and economic cooperation have continued to grow steadily as smooth progress of the contract projects portents enormous potentialities for mutual investment [5].

While economic ties, trade and two-way investment between China and India posted steady growth, cooperation in the security area is not that encouraging. China’s issue of stapled visa’s to the inhabitants of Jammu and Kashmir and its denial of visa to the citizens of India from Arunachal Pradesh (China still claims Arunachal Pradesh as part of it) are some of the irritants in enlisting cooperation from it on security matters. As the two countries’ international roles grow, the maritime interaction between the two sides has become a focus a concern as they began to explore for dialogue on maritime security. The hot line is established between the prime ministers of the two countries. This will be an effective way of dispelling misunderstandings on both sides at a time of crisis and preventing the escalation of the crisis. By and large the two
sides have made progress in the negotiations over sensitive and complex security and strategic issues which helped to reduce the “deficit” in strategic mutual reassurance.

In the recent years, as India plays an increasing salient role in the reshaping of international order, it has become one of the strategic partners China counts on. The two countries support each other in regional cooperation and made joint efforts to promote peace, stability and development in Asia. China and India join hands in handling many global issues such as international trade, sustainable development, safeguarding the rights and interests of developing countries and facilitating improvement and reshaping of the existing international economic order. All these are outstanding highlights for bilateral cooperation which provides a convincing footnote for Sino-Indian strategic partnership. The BRICS, G20 Summit and The East Asia Summit have now become important venues for close interaction between leaders of the two countries in sustainable development of bilateral relations.

By 2060, China and India would have half of the world GDP with OECD’s share shrinking to one quarter. In this changed context it would be a good idea for India and China to improve the opportunities of interaction to reframe issues and collaborate for an Asian century of prosperity. Both India and China share the goal of democratisation of multilateralism for sharing prosperity, seeking a greater role in shaping the global affairs to replace the G7 grouping of developed countries, which has so far been deciding the global agenda. Already the first steps have been taken in this direction with the establishment of New Development Bank. Here, too, cooperation has triumphed over conflict. India agreed to his headquarters in Shanghai and China has not retained for itself the position of the head of the new bank or the supervisory bodies, thereby recognising the emergence of a multipolar world order.

At the global level, the compartmentalised arrangements between the UN General Assembly, Bretton Woods Institutions and the Security Council are not able to respond to trade-offs between economic growth and global ecological limits. By 2060, in Asia and other developing countries demand for food, water and energy is expected to double, and reshaping a global system that serve the natural resources and human security needs of one-fifth of the global population for a shared vision of prosperity for four billion people who have yet to benefit from globalization, will provide legitimacy for new global rules.

The focus will have to be on use and distribution, rather than scarcity, of natural resources. Technological innovation will be a key driver, requiring a review of the Intellectual Rights Regime, which ignores societal concerns. New approaches responding to new challenges will be needed in areas such as energy, water, food and cyber security. In climate change there is already a close collaboration with China. A shared global vision will overcome both the global rule making deficit and competition inherent in the re-emergence of two Asian giants without unduly antagonising the others.

India has the capacity for global leadership in developing new pharmaceuticals and crop varieties, as we are the only country with both extensive endemic bio-diversity and a world class endogenous bio-technology capacity, along with global leadership in software development. China has developed global leadership in solar energy and information technology hardware. Together these are the foundations of the knowledge-based economy that will dominate the world a decade from now. Joint research for the next wave of innovation will be the real win-win dividend for both – keeping out of middle income trap [6].

**New thinking in Boosting Sino-Indian Relations**

To further strengthen the Sino-Indian relations, the decision makers of both the countries should look at the following challenges:
Diluting the Historical Disputes over the Boundary and accurately defining and Taking Care of Each Side’s core National Interests

There are few major powers in the world today with their boundaries on land territories left non-delineated as in the case of India and China. Boundary negotiations between the two countries have been going on and off since the 1980’s. The boundary dispute has been a liability for both sides left over by western colonialists and a thorn in the side of the two nations, irritating their nerves from the time to time and often being exploited by the outsiders. The issue has extracted much energy and effort from the two governments and still has a decisive impact on the bilateral relations today. To a certain extent, the boundary dispute is a comprehensive display of the lack of strategic mutual assurance, old scores, the Tibetan question and national sentiments between China and India. At present, there is still a large gap in this thorny issue, it not only requires high negotiating skills and diplomatic wisdom, but it is more imperative for the two sides to approach and handle the issue from a strategic perspective with sufficient courage to make compromises and the ability to guide public opinion in addition to shaping a favourable international environment. In view of the fact that this is a highly sensitive issue, the two sides should maintain peace and stability in the border areas, narrow down the perception gap with regard to the Actual Line of Control, and improve and increase frontier trade. In the contemporary circumstances, there is no way out to settle the boundary question by force, but the only way out is to hold peace talks with patience, hard work and mutual accommodation, thereby finally forming a clear-cut boundary of friendship acknowledged by the people of the two countries.

Redefining the Nature and Connotation of Sino-Indian “Strategic Partnership”

In 2005, China and India announced that the two countries would “build toward a strategic partnership for peace and prosperity”, in 2006, the two sides formulated ten strategic principles for Sino-Indian cooperation and agreed to further deepen and strengthen the strategic partnership. Under changed circumstances, in order to consolidate and enrich Sino-Indian strategic cooperation and upgrade the bilateral relationship to a new high, it is necessary to redefine the preliminary nature of such strategic partnership. “The formulation of building toward a strategic partnership for peace and prosperity” appropriately reflects the most important political meaning of Sino-Indian relations, namely peace means that the two countries not only should or cannot come into confrontation, but should or cannot regard each other as a mortal strategic threat, while prosperity means that both countries conclude that national economic and social development is their fundamental task and that foreign policy is aimed at creating a peaceful international environment which is favourable for domestic development. Building toward Sino-Indian strategic partnership is a strategic decision made by leaders of both countries rather than a tactical expediency. The two sides should meet each other half way and make concerted efforts. As Sino-Indian relations are entering a critical phase in which issues involving the core national interests of both side will be looming large in the foreseeable future, it is all the more imperative for the two sides to persistently adhere to the strategic partnership. Pessimistic views and comments on Sino-Indian relations in both countries reflect the author’s different positions and purposes, but what is in common is that they all overrate the difference and contradictions between the two countries to the neglect of the common missions and shared interests of the two governments and peoples.

Each Side Taking a Rational Approach to the Rapid Rise of the other and Calmly Handling Emerging Problems in Competition

Side-by-side rise of China and India in the international political landscape is independent of man’s will. In recent years, Indian official at different levels have emphatically pointed out on various occasions that there is a vast area In the world for common development of China and
India, which contributes to global peace, stability and prosperity and that India does not regard Indo-Chinese relations as confrontational. Bilateral trade is increasing with each passing year and the two sides often discuss many global issues including international economic order, sustainable development and climate change. Meanwhile, it is self-evident that the two countries complete in comprehensive national strength and international influence. The two sides should take a rational approach to and properly handle such competition. Positive competition is a major external driver of mankind’s continuous progress. One should not take a negative approach to or oversimplify Sino-Indian relations. Former Indian Ambassador to China Nirupama Rao wrote an article a few years ago, in which he said, “ours is a complex and multi-layered relationship. At the same time, in order to make a fair assessment about today’s diplomacy, where national interests and real politics debate the actions of state players, no relationship that is intense enough to be called a strategic partnership could lend itself to simplistic portrayal in dichotomous terms of competition and cooperation. There will always be overlaps between competition and cooperation. A fair amount of healthy competition is not necessarily bad and can indeed lead to more meaningful cooperation”. As India grows in strength, it has closer ties with foreign countries and enhanced its military power. This has led some Chinese commentators to think that India pose a greater threat to China and makes China nervous. They are afraid that India would attempt to use force to settle the boundary question or collaborate with the United States in containing China. However, it has been evident to date that the external strategy of India still mainly aims at enhancing its international standing and strategic independence, which is conventional thinking and that “learning one-sidedly to the United States”, or confrontation with China, is not the “DNA of India’s foreign policy”, and nor is it in its fundamental national interest. On the long run, therefore, taking a rational approach to the growing strength of the other side and calmly handling competition will be “a normal subject” in Sino-Indian relations.

Establishing a Multi-pillar Institutionalized Sino-Indian Cooperative Relationship

First of all, post-cold war Sino-Indian relations indicate that as exchange of visit by leaders and high-ranking officials facilitate progress of bilateral relations, it is necessary for the two sides to institutionalize the exchange of visits by top political leaders and maintain frequent contact between officials at all levels on regular basis so as to effectively and maintain stable bilateral ties. Secondly, both sides should make and work out necessary confidence measures in the border areas with a view to ultimately delineating the boundary while maintaining peace and stability along the border. Finally, expansion of trade and other economic exchanges between the two countries is mutually beneficial and sustainable. Moreover, as China and India play an increasing important role in world affairs, it is essential for the two sides to establish a coordinating regime for theirs overseas interests. Both sides should take measures to facilitate non-confrontational dialogue and civil society exchanges between academic and cultural communities of the two countries. Such measures are of profound and far-reaching significance for sustained development of bilateral relations. Overall, Sino-Indian relations after the cold war have been based on “Four pillars” of cooperative frameworks, namely regular summit meetings and high-level meetings, military confidence building measures (CBM’s), boundary negotiations and high-level meetings, mutual investment. “The four pillars, as a diplomatic substructure, willow longer suffice; a new China-India architecture will be required. This must be a deeply layered, multilevel, interlocking structure for mutual confidence, consultation, and coordination involving political leaders, legislators, officials, experts, businesses, policy institutes, academics, students and other actors in the two societies – like the ramified architecture of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. It should aim to identify and
strengthen common ground, manage conflict as it arises, and promote cooperation in bilateral as well as international affairs”.

**Energetically Fostering Objective, Balanced Public Opinion and Academic Studies**

Due to unique-historical background and lack of mutual understanding between China and India, the bilateral relationship is very vulnerable to criticisms in the media and public opinion. With rapid development of new mass media and cyber technology, there are more and more stakeholders and actors which are involved in and may influence Sino-Indian relations. Therefore, mutual perceptions and popular sentiments may easily be swayed by media reports and public opinion. In India’s mass media, sensational news reports hyping on Indo-China relations are an unspoken rule for “political validity” of Indian media. Indian high-ranking officials fall under the sway of public opinion from time to time or purposefully release messages through the media to expert pressures to bear up the Chinese side. In China, media reports about India are also more and more multi-polarized with a great variation in quality and spectrum, not without misjudgements or impertinent comments. Though the relevant authorities in both countries are already aware of this, it will take a fairly long time to fundamentally close this “perceptional gap”. Looking ahead, in order to promote long-term, sound and sustainable development of Sino-Indian relations and solidify bilateral ties with more room for maneuver, it is essential for both sides to create a favourable environment of objective, balanced public opinion so that each side correctly perceives and analyses the words and deeds of the other side [7].

**References**

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5. Lan Jianxue (2013) Sino-Indian Relations – New Way of Thinking and “Rebalancing”.