

SINO-INDIAN RELATIONS: COMPETITION OR COOPERATION?

Despite protests by the Chinese government, the Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama went ahead with plans to visit a heavily militarized Tibetan Buddhist area in northeast India in November 2009, which is the focus of an intense territorial dispute between China and India. Dalai Lama had re-iterated that he did not want to be the cause for escalation of tensions between India and China, the former being his host for past six decades. This visit had ignited the Sino-Indian border dispute and could risk making this region the proxy battleground where both India and China seek to proclaim their respective sovereignty. Dalai Lama's recent visits and public appearances in different non-political events in India have once again irked the Chinese officials who believe that India is inciting anti-Chinese sentiments leading to cancellation of high-profile talks at the governmental levels.

Tension had slowly been building up between the two Asian giants, with media commentators further inciting the divergence of opinions. There have been wide-spread speculations regarding Chinese intentions to wage war on India, which is unlikely in the current scenario. Reports had also appeared in Chinese state media alleging that India was moving troops and fighter aircraft to the northeast, specifically into Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh.

The Sino-Indian border dispute continues to remain a cause of slightly greater concern as the two countries have been in mutually antagonistic and unchanging positions for decades. There also seems to be a lack of genuine diplomatic initiative to resolve the tension and a growing differential in comprehensive national power which increasingly favours China.¹

Meeting his Chinese counter-part, Wen Jiabao on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit in Hanoi on 28-29 October, 2010, the Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh set the tone by commenting that *"China's rise is a fact of life"*, implying that China has to be engaged, and not contained, thoughtfully and imaginatively; China needed to be respected and not suspected, trusted and not doubted. Referring to Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, the Indian Foreign Secretary Ms. Nirupama Rao said that dealing with a *"peaceful rise of China requires close analysis, study and understanding"*.²

But the world has taken little notice of the rising border tensions and sharpening geopolitical rivalry between the two giants that represent competing political and social models of development. Even though China and India have more than 20-years track record of cooperation, both countries have ample justification for being cautious. On the one hand, US hegemony and greater US in-

volvement in Asia may push the two neighbours toward even more cooperation. On the other hand, the degree to which one nation perceives the other as a threat could encourage closer ties with the United States. According to the United States National Intelligence Council Report on emerging global trends, by 2015, international community will have to confront the military, political and economic dimensions of the rise of China and India. How these two countries manage their relationship will have a tremendous impact on peace and stability in the regional and, increasingly, global context. Against this backdrop of a changing international environment, the two Asian powers find themselves locked into what Barry Buzan has called the “*security complex*” within which they are expected to manage their rivalry and develop ties of cooperation.³ Historical evidence shows that although China has been a major security concern for India, the Chinese were less wary of India and concentrated more on the pattern of superpower rivalry existing between the United States and the former Soviet Union during the Cold War.

After years of cold peace, mistrust and hostility since the Sino-Indian border clashes in 1962, the demands of realpolitik and pragmatism in policy-making transformed one of Asia's most important

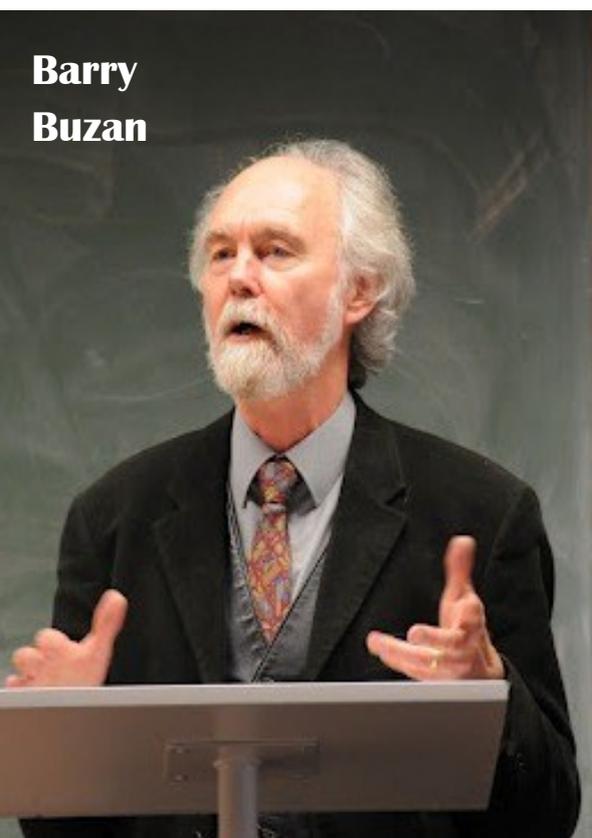
relationships - bilateral ties between India and China. The end of the Cold War witnessed the development of two defining characteristics in the security environment of the Asia-Pacific region: First, the United States has become the only superpower in the world today. It is also the most important external power in Asia, and plays a key role in Asian security; Second, old rivals,

China and India have emerged as strong regional powers, as evidenced by impressive economic growth, the development of nuclear arsenals, and demonstrated ambitions for respective influences in the Pacific and South Asian regions.

While China's role as an economic and geo-strategic player is more widely recognized, India is slowly emerging as a regional competitor to be taken seriously. China and India, the two largest developing countries in the world, have a commonality of history, culture, economy and social characteristics, despite certain irreconcilable differences. Each is concentrating its resources to expedite internal economic development, carries out an independent foreign policy and strives for a peaceful international environment. China is a big power in East Asia while India is a big power in South Asia. Each enjoys advantages and influence in their respective regions. In spite of sharing a glorious civilizational past and having never fought a single war until their emergence as modern states, security competition between India and China is inevitable as their economies grow. However, the positive note is that this security competition does not have to be conflictual.

The contemporary picture in China-India relations today is that both nations are engaged in attempting to put the past behind and forge new relationships based on the emerging global strategic realities. Trade and economic ties have grown exponentially in the last few years and leaders of both the countries have expressed determination to find solutions to the China-India boundary dispute which have distorted relations in the past. The changing reality of India-China ties is clearly reflected in economic issues which are increasingly becoming the most vital component of official discourse and academic enquiry both in the Western countries, as well as, in India and China. As a result of this growing interest amongst experts and officials of both these countries, India-China economic engagement has since come to be recognized as one of the most reliable CBM (confidence-building measure) in the trajectory of India-China political rapprochement.

Barry Buzan



The post-Soviet world system has been characterized by the opening up of geographical boundaries of the different nations in the overall perspective of economic integration. The Cold War rivalry between two divergent political systems is no more the parameter for choice of allies. The confrontational diplomacy has been replaced by consensus and engagement. The new mood of engagement between India and China has been influenced by the developments in the international sphere, which would shape their domestic and foreign policies in the days ahead.⁴

China and India has embarked on what can be broadly described as the path of “cooperative security”.⁵ The concept of cooperative security derives from the liberal traditionalist paradigm offering a new approach to managing security dilemmas that states face in regional and global contexts. This approach is founded on two essential arguments. First, threats to security are no longer solely military. They are increasingly diverse and multidimensional ranging from economic underdevelopment and trade imbalances, irregular migration of people and uncontrolled population growth, human rights abuses and drug trafficking, conflict over access to natural resources and environmental degradation and the most effective being the threat of terrorist attacks from unidentified elements in society. Second, the management of these emerging security issues require multilateral efforts through the processes of discussion, negotiation and cooperation between both the governmental (track I approach) and non-governmental (track II approach) actors.

The divergences and convergences in Sino-Indian interests reveal that India and China are two major powers in Asia with global aspirations and certain specific, significant conflicting interests given their historical legacies. As a result, some amount of friction in their bilateral relationship is inevitable. Though competition between the two emerging Asian giants is not ruled out, their relationship should be sustained for developing a meaningful positive relationship and contentious bilateral issues should not deter the process.

While the prospect of a better economic interaction has brought two countries closer in recent years, external factors play a viable role in determining the future course of their relationship. The relations of the two Asian powers with the U.S. and Russia, the former Cold War adversaries, have a decisive impact on the future evolution of Sino-Indian relations. It is inevitable that their efforts will be affected by the policies of the great powers that play a decisive role in the international sphere. India will be closer to the US for defend-

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ing their shared values of democracy, freedom and pluralism and maintaining its policy of broad-based engagement with the United States particularly in view of the terrorist attacks. Similarly, India will be steadfast on its relation with Russia based on its historical, friendly ties which will further strengthen through economic and military cooperation. Thus, while in the Cold War, ties with the superpowers strained Sino-Indian relations; now balancing India’s relationship with each of them will determine its relations with China.

Both China and India rely heavily on Russian military technology and equipment for modernization of their defence systems. There has been evidence that the Chinese military is engaged in a modernization programme although it is very paradoxical given the fact that China is keen to develop community-building exercises with its neighbours to foster a peaceful regional environment for overall growth and prosperity. The U.S. Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld speaking to Asian defence ministers at an annual security conference about a Pentagon report on China in

2005 highlighted that “China appears to be expanding its missile forces, allowing them to reach targets in many areas of the world, not just the Pacific region, while also expanding its missile capabilities. Since no nation threatens China, one must wonder: Why this growing investment?”⁶

Chinese analysts have argued, Beijing's increased defence spending is in line with the country's economic growth and the spending is needed to modernize a force that is well behind in technology, hardware and logistics. The government officials have stressed that China has no intention of threatening its neighbours or disturbing regional stability as part of its “peaceful development” strategy.⁷ Its mission, they say, is to develop a credible deterrent such that Taiwan does not declare independence. As Mr Jaswant Singh, Leader of the Opposition, Rajya Sabha (India's Upper House of Parliament) can be quoted in a dialogue of the Brookings Leadership Forum of the Brookings Institution, Washington DC, on May 31, 2005 that “the People's Republic of China is currently so engaged with the great issues like economic modernization that confront them as a country, that there is no free play available to engage in conflict. It has always been China's strategic philosophy that if your adversary is humbled without conflict, then that is a much better way to hum-

ble.”⁸ Although the Chinese military build-up is not directly targeted towards India, India needs to prepare itself to face any such challenges, in the view of Chinese military preparedness. The possibility of a Sino-Indian arms race can disrupt the strategic stability of the Asian security system and jeopardize the achievements in the economic sphere.

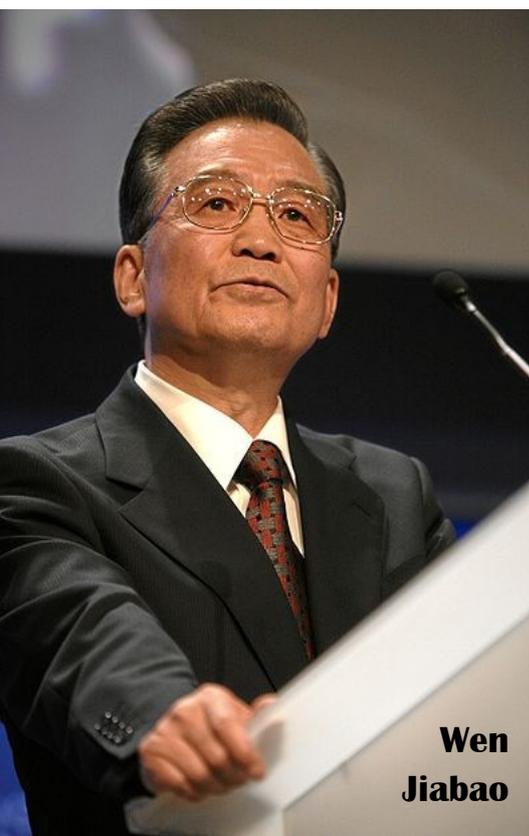
However, the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to India in April 2005 had signalled a significant shift

in relations between the two nations after more than five decades of mutual distrust and suspicion. The statement signed during this visit emphasized that the two countries would promote diplomatic relations, economic ties and work jointly to address global challenges and threats.⁹ China and India have agreed that an all-round expansion of economic cooperation between the two countries constitutes an important dimension of their deeply entrenched relationship and that they should make joint efforts to increase bilateral trade volume surpassing the \$61.7 billion achieved in 2010.

Both the leadership in New Delhi and Beijing are displaying greater caution and pragmatism in managing the differences and working on common causes of concerns and interests. Therefore, there continues to remain the possibilities of both cooperation and competition between the two countries and the decision-making processes of their political regimes will play a critical role in formulating the future agenda of India-China relations.

Many seem to believe that the American President Obama's recent visit to India is the indicator of the forging of a strong alliance against China. Both China and India being more than 3,000 years old as nations and with more than 2,000 years of recorded contacts between them do not necessarily need to tread that path. Both have respected and trusted each other from the ancient times. Chinese society believes in maintaining order, given Confucianism's influence and the majority Hindus of India is influenced by the concept of “*Basudaiva Kutumbakam*” (universal brotherhood). Therefore, it is also imperative to look at what concepts and notions shape the societal perceptions in these two countries, as the government and its policies are nothing but the reflection of the society.

It is acceptable, that as two neighbours, India and China will have their differences and they will give vent to their dissatisfaction and at times may pose to threaten each other to appease a small segment of their nationalist population, it is how-



Wen
Jiabao

ever unlikely that either one of them would enter into a serious strategic alliance against the other. As Professor Chellaney continues to re-iterate¹⁰ that if relations with China need to improve, India must have an honest and open debate on its diplomatic and military options. Zeng Jianhua, Director of Asian, African and Latin American Affairs at the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA) has also emphasized on the role of non-governmental exchange, culture and media in deepening mutual understanding; how to deal with trade frictions; and how to enhance bilateral ties between China and India.¹¹ In the second session of the Carnegie Europe Roundtable Series, Carnegie's Ashley J. Tellis explained how Sino-Indian relations have changed and their bilateral relations are now defined by a complex balance of competition and cooperation that Tellis characterized as *co-engagement*.¹² It is understandable that the coming decades will witness growing interaction between the two countries on a variety of issues than ever before. The main concern is whether those areas, in which interaction is mutually beneficial, such as increased trade, will remain unaffected by competition over more contentious issues such as both countries' quest for energy security.¹³ It remains to be seen if China and India are destined for conflict or cooperation in the transitional multi-polar world order.

Notes:

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