

Sino-Indian Relations: Contours and Contents

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This article undertakes a historical tour d'horizon of relations between China and India from ancient to contemporary times. It provides a factual narrative of the journey that these two Asian civilisations and nation-states have taken over millennia and focuses on cultural as well as political and economic factors which have helped manage serious problems and crises. The author presents a hopeful picture of present-day ties between the two Asian giants and expresses guarded optimism about the ability of both sides to handle the pressures of growing competition in the future.

The Sino-Indian relationship is multi-layered. There are many aspects to it, which in fact reinforce one another. The relationship has cultural and civilisational linkage, political resonance, strategic and security dimensions and robust economic content as well. This article makes and attempts to put this complex and yet dynamic relationship in perspective.

In the narrative of Sino-Indian civilisational linkage, cultural and philosophical bonding occupies a very important position. From time immemorial, trade and commercial intercourse between India and China, which are well researched and documented, between land and sea, embraced ideas as well as merchandise. As is well known, there was a regular stream of Buddhist missionaries from India to China, beginning in AD 65 with Kashyapa Matanga, who was followed by such scholars as Kumarajiva, Dharmakshama, and Paramartha. Chinese scholars too gravitated towards India and left behind their indelible imprint on it. Of these, the best known are Fa Hien and Hiun-Tsang, whose records of travels form an important source material of India's social and political history.

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The civilisational and cultural linkages between the two nations and their people have been carried forward in modern times. An eloquent statement of India's support and solidarity for China was evident even prior to India's independence. The first joint action plan against imperialism was drafted by India and China at the International Congress against imperialism and for national independence, held in Brussels in February, 1927. Jawaharlal Nehru, who became independent India's first Prime Minister, represented the Indian National Congress at this Congress.

Besides Buddhism, which is a perennial source of bonding between India and China, two towering figures have epitomised and carried forward India-China friendship and amity to greater heights. One is Dr. Dwarkanath Kotnis, the legendary doctor who served in China during a very critical juncture of its national life in the late 1930s and died there leaving behind an indelible imprint. Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, whose 150th birth anniversary is being celebrated this year, was yet another iconic figure whose memory continues to nourish and nurture the relationship between the two countries and their people. Tagore is rated by the leading *People's Daily* of China as one of the fifty important personalities who have influenced modern Chinese thinking.

Tagore's engagement with China coincided at a time when both India and China were passing through a churning process in their respective histories. Those were the times when China was passing through a major transition. In the historic 1911 Revolution, the nationalist party (KMT) under the leadership of Dr. Sun Yat-sen came to power, ending feudalism and imperialism. In India, the situation was not very different. It was a coincidence that the year republicanism came into being in China, in India, the capital was transferred from Calcutta to Delhi signalling the consolidation of colonialism, and correspondingly the clamour for freedom gained momentum in the country. There was a new awakening in both India and China. The idea of nationalism, freedom and liberty had stirred the hearts and minds of the people of the two countries separately and independently. The two countries were passing through a cataclysm. In China, an old and archaic order gave way to republicanism, and in India, resurgent nationalism was brewing in the length and breadth of the country. It was against this backdrop that Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, bringing great laurels to Asia. As soon as Tagore was catapulted to international fame immediately after winning the Nobel Prize, he received accolades and recognition in China as well.

The legendary doctor Dwarkanath Kotnis was yet another iconic figure who continues to be the harbinger spirit of Sino-Indian amity and friendship. It may be recalled that Jawaharlal Nehru, who weaved the foreign policy of India even prior to independence, was pained when the war broke out between China and Japan in 1938. He raised his voice for the Chinese people and aroused mass support for them. In this context, Marshal Zhu De, the Commander of the Eight Route Army, wrote a letter to Nehru expressing gratitude for the moral support of the Indian people and appealed for medical supplies, surgical instruments and assistance to train doctors and nurses. Zhu De's appeal stirred Nehru to give a call for China Solidarity Day throughout India on 9 January 1938. He also took the initiative to send a medical team with necessary supplies and instruments to China as a token of the Indian peoples' sympathy and solidarity with the Chinese people in their struggle against colonialism and imperialism. The medical team, selected by a committee headed by Dr. Jivraj Mehta, was led by Dr. M. Atal and had in it Dr. M.R. Cholkar, Dr. Bijay Kumar Basu, Dr. Deben Mukherjee and the young doctor, Dwarkanath Kotnis.

When the People's Republic of China was formally proclaimed on 1st October 1949, India was the second non-communist country to accord recognition to it. The birth of Communist China found its echo and resonance in the Provisional Parliament of India. Though the two countries followed different political paths, the advent of Communist China was welcomed by the members of the Provisional Parliament. President Rajendra Prasad, in his Address to the House on 31st January 1951, referred to the Government of India's recognition of the People's Republic of China and hoped for an early exchange of diplomatic representation. Pointing out that India and China had friendly relations in the past for more than two thousand years, he expressed his optimism that those friendly contacts would be carried forward in the interest of preserving peace in Asia and the world.

Initiating a debate on external affairs on 17th March 1950, Nehru asserted that 'it was not a question of approving or disapproving; it was a question of recognition of a major event in history and of appreciating it and dealing with it'. Articulating the policy of Independent India in the broaden Asian context, he said,

"It affects us, because we are in Asia, it affects us because we are in a strategic part of Asia, set in the Centre of Indian Ocean with intimate connections with Western Asia, with South-east Asia and with Far Eastern Asia. We could not ignore it, even if we would, and we do not want to ignore it".

It was just coincidence that when India recognised the People's Republic of China, around the same time, a crisis loomed large in the Korean Peninsula. A Special Session of Parliament was convened in July 1950 to discuss the Korean crisis. Later, participating in a debate and referring to the problem relating to the admission of the PRC to the United Nations, Nehru maintained that after having recognised the new regime, it would have been exceedingly unreasonable not to accept the logical consequences thereof. He said, "It is not for us to criticise what they do internally in their country, as it is not for them to criticise internal happenings in our country". This nuanced approach is being followed even today with renewed freshness by the government of India. The debate that followed witnessed near unanimity of views with regard to China's admission to the United Nations.

While India hailed the birth of the People's Republic of China as a major event in world history, tension started surfacing between the two countries with regard to developments in Tibet. It was in this backdrop that the Chinese Premier Zhou En-lai visited India in 1954 on the invitation of the Government of India. The high point of the visit was the ratification of the Sino-Indian Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet and India, which was signed earlier in April, the same year. Under this agreement, India gave up all the extraterritorial rights enjoyed in Tibet by the British Government of India and recognised that the Tibet was a region of China. The Agreement, which was to be enforced for eight years, specified trade agencies, markets and pilgrim routes and laid down regulations for trade and intercourse across the common border.

Moreover, in the preamble of the Agreement, the two countries affirmed that they would abide by the Five Principles of (i) Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, (ii) Mutual non-aggression, (iii) Mutual non-interference in each other internal affairs, (iv) Equality and mutual benefit, and (v) Peaceful coexistence. The Agreement was accompanied by an exchange of notes dealing with matters relating to the withdrawal of Indian Military escorts stationed at Yatung and Gkyante and the transfer of the post, telegraphs and telephones services and the rest houses belonging to the Government of India in Tibet to the Government of China.

The Chinese Premier, Zhou En-lai was given a warm reception in New Delhi. In a joint statement issued at the conclusion of their talks, the two Prime Ministers re-affirmed the Five Principles and declared,

“If these principles are applied not only between various countries but also in international relations generally, they would form a solid foundation for peace and security and the fears and apprehensions that exist today would give place to a feeling of confidence...”

Later, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru reciprocated the visit, when he went to China in October of the same year. Nehru took up with Chinese leaders the question of some maps published in China which had shown an incorrect boundary alignment between the two countries.

In spite of the problem brewing in Tibet, India tried its best to maintain the tempo of friendship with its northern neighbour. It was in this backdrop that Zhou En-lai visited India for the second time in 1956. Premier Zhou En-lai's visit was reciprocated with the return visit of Vice-President S. Radhakrishnan to China in 1957 from the Indian side. The situation in the border was deteriorating and it was in this context that the Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959, and India extended refuge to him. The relationship between the two countries reached its lowest ebb when Chinese forces crossed the McMahon Line and a war broke out between the two countries in October 1962. A truce, however, was reached with the Chinese three-point proposal, according to which both parties agreed to respect the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and the armed forces agreed to withdraw 20 kilometres from the LAC.

The short-lived war cast a shadow on the relationship between the two countries for a considerable period. The diplomatic impasse spanning for 15 years ended with the appointment of K.R. Narayanan, the distinguished diplomat, as Ambassador to China in 1976. The resumption of diplomatic relationship was followed by the visit of Atal Behari Vajpayee, the External Affairs Minister of India of the erstwhile Janata Government, in February 1979. Vajpayee, however, cut short his visit to China as a mark of solidarity with Hanoi when China attacked Vietnam. Vajpayee's visit was returned with the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua to India in June 1981, and ever since there has been no looking backward and the Sino-Indian relationship is moving in a fairly satisfactory trajectory in spite of occasional hiccups and roadblocks.

A major landmark in the relationship between the two countries was the path breaking visit of the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to China in December 1988, which established the Joint Working Group (JWG) and laid the groundwork for defence cooperation and military engagement. From the Chinese side, Premier Li Peng visited India in December

1991 and reiterated Beijing's pledge to resolve the boundary question through friendly consultations. The momentum of political contact and engagement at the highest level was carried forward with the state visit of President R. Venkat Raman to China in May 1992. This was the first Head-of-State visit from India to China. A milestone in the military relationship between the two countries was achieved with the visit of Sharad Pawar, the then Defence Minister to China in July 1992. It was the first ever visit by a Defence Minister of India to China. During the visit, it was agreed to develop academic, military, scientific and technological exchanges between the two countries. It is also believed that during Mr. Pawar's visit, the Chinese military leadership emphasised the importance of force reduction in the border region due to the prohibitive costs. This visit laid the ground for the signing of the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border area on 7th September 1993, during the visit of the then Prime Minister P.V. Narashima Rao. The Agreement was indeed a breakthrough. In view of its importance, it is worthwhile to elucidate some of the salient features of the Agreement.

In the first place, the Agreement affirmed the view that the India- China boundary question shall be resolved through peaceful and friendly consultations and that neither side shall use or threaten to use force against the other by any means. Yet another important highlight of the Agreement was that it stipulated that pending an ultimate solution of the boundary question between the two countries, the two sides shall strictly observe the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between the two sides and that no activities of either side shall overstep the line of actual control. In case the personnel of one side crossed the line of LAC, upon being confirmed by the other side, they shall immediately pull back to their own side of the LAC. It further provided that, when necessary, the two sides shall jointly check and determine the segments of the line of LAC when they have different views as to its position.

Secondly, the agreement provided that each side will keep its military forces in the area along the LAC to a minimum level compatible with the friendly and good neighbourly relations between the two countries. It further iterated that the two sides agree to reduce their military forces along LAC, in conformity with the requirement of the principle of mutual and equal security, to ceilings to be mutually agreed, and that the reduction of military forces shall be carried out by stages in mutually agreed geographical locations along the line of actual control.

Thirdly, as regards military exercises, the Agreement mentioned that each side should give the other prior notification of the military exercises of specified levels near the LAC permitted under the Agreement. Fourthly, in case of contingency or other problems arising in the areas of LAC, the two sides shall deal with them through meetings and friendly consultations between border personnel of the two countries. Fifthly, the two sides also agreed in the accord to take adequate measures to ensure that air intrusions across the line of actual control do not take place and that the two sides shall undertake mutual consultation in case intrusions occur.

As a follow up of this agreement, a senior level Chinese military delegation aimed at fostering Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) between the defence forces of the two countries made a six-day goodwill visit to India in December 1993. The visit was reciprocated by the Indian Army Chief General B.C. Joshi's visit to China in July 1994. Since then, regular exchanges have been taking place at various levels.

Three years later came the 'Agreement between the Government of Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas', signed on 29th November 1996 during the visit of Chinese President Jiang Zemin to India. President Zemin's visit to India was the first of its kind by a Chinese President. A definite proof of China's regard for India during this period was when Beijing maintained neutrality in the Kargil War between India and Pakistan in 1999.

It was against this background of signing of various agreements providing for CBMs that a slew of visits at various levels between the two countries gave further impetus. The most significant of these was that of the then Defence Minister, George Fernandes, to China in April 2003. The visit of Mr. Fernandes took place after the gap of more than one decade and also helped ease the post-Pokhran tensions generated by India's nuclear tests.

Defence co-operation and military engagement between the two countries further received a boost during the visit of the then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to China in June 2003. During Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit to China a 'Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Co-operation' was signed. This was the first comprehensive document on development of bilateral relations signed at the highest level between the two countries. India and China concluded a border trade protocol to add a border crossing between Sikkim and the

Tibet Autonomous Region. This Agreement officially accorded Chinese recognition to previously disputed Sikkim as a part of India. The joint declaration between the two countries signed on 23 June, 2003, *inter alia*, mentioned that

“...they agreed on the need to broaden and deepen defence exchanges between the two countries, which will help enhance and deepen mutual understanding and trust between the two armed forces. They confirmed that the exchange of visits by their Defence Ministers and of military officials at various levels should be strengthened”.

The upward swing of defence cooperation and military engagement between the two countries was given a further impetus during the visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in April 2005 in the ‘Protocol between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Modalities for the Implementations of Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas’, signed on 11 April, 2005. This Protocol sought to further elucidate certain provisions of the 1996 confidence building accord while reiterating verbatim some of the bilateral commitments in the accord.

Yet another significant agreement signed between the two countries during the visit of Premier Wen Jiabao was the agreement pertaining to the ‘Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question’. The highlight of the Agreement was clause VII, which stipulated that ‘in reaching a boundary settlement, the two sides shall safeguard due interests of the settled population in the border area’. This clause raised optimism among Indian Scholars and analysts that, eventually, Beijing would agree for a swap deal whereby it would accede to India’s claim over Arunachal Pradesh in lieu of India recognising China’s claim over Aksai-Chin. The Chinese side, however, had a different interpretation of the clause.

It was against this background of heightened engagement between the two countries that the then Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee visited China on a five-day visit in May/June 2006 and held wide ranging talks with Chinese leaders, including Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and his Chinese counterpart, General Cao Gangchuan. The high point of the visit was the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which is first ever of its kind between the two countries. The MOU envisages the establishment of a mechanism to ensure frequent and regular exchanges between leaders and officials of the Defence Ministries and the armed forces of the two countries, in addition to developing an annual calendar for holding regular

joint military exercises and training programmes. The Defence Minister also visited the sensitive Lanzhou Military Area Command which controls the largest physical area of China's seven military regions. The region holding the nuclear research and missile testing facilities in the Chinese West comes under the Command of this area. Mr. Mukherjee's visit to the headquarters of the Lanzhou Military Command was a significant step in the process of building bilateral trust and confidence between the two countries. These gains were further consolidated during the visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to India in November 2006.

The next significant development in the bilateral relationship between the two countries was the visit of Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh to China in January 2008, during which the two sides signed 'A Shared Vision for the 21st Century of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India'. In this document, the two sides resolved 'to promote the building of harmonious world of durable peace and common prosperity through developing the Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity between the two countries'. The document also stated that 'China-India relations are not targeted at any country, nor will it affect their friendship with other countries'. Referring to India's aspiration to be a member of UNSC, it said,

"The Chinese side attaches great importance to India's position as a major developing country in international affairs. The Chinese side understands and support India's aspirations to play a greater role in the United Nations, including in the Security Council".

Finally, regarding the border dispute, the statement said the two sides remain firmly committed to resolving outstanding differences, including the boundary question, through peaceful negotiations, while ensuring that such differences are not allowed to affect the positive development of bilateral relations. The two sides reiterated their determination to seek a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution to the boundary question and to build a boundary of peace and friendship on the basis of the 'Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the China-India Boundary Question', which had been concluded in April 2005.

Relating to India's 'one China' policy, it said that 'India was among the first countries to recognise that there is one China and that its one China policy has remained unaltered. The Indian side states that it would continue to abide by its one China policy, and oppose any activity that is against the one China principle. The Chinese side expresses its appreciation for the Indian position.'

It is pertinent to mention that besides bilateral meetings, the leaders of the two countries, including the two Prime Ministers, have been meeting on the margins of multilateral meetings such as the Asia-Europe Conference, the G-20 summits, the ASEAN Summit Meetings and gatherings of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the BRICS. The visit of Premier Wen Jiabao to India in December, 2010, was the last major bilateral meeting between the two Prime Ministers. During that visit, Premier Wen Jiabao reiterated China's nuanced response to India's bid for UNSC seat and to address the vexed stapled visas issue. But the visit was significant in terms of economic content in the bilateral relationship. During the visit, the two countries vowed to raise the bilateral trade to \$100 billion by 2015. A major irritant pertaining to the issue of stapled visa was removed when the journalists from Jammu and Kashmir, accompanying Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh on his visit to Sanya in China to participate in the BRICS meeting in April 2011, were issued proper visas and not stapled visas. This in turn facilitated the visit of an Indian defence delegation to China later in June.

Thus, there is cautious optimism in the bilateral relationship between the two countries. There are, however, problems like the unresolved border issue, China's support to Pakistan, and its infrastructural development in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), damming of the Tsang Po River, China's footprints in South-Asia, and the trade imbalance with India. But given the nature of political understanding and economic mutual interdependence, it is likely that the two countries will be able to manage their comprehensive relationship without many difficulties in the short-term or medium-term perspective. What required is more regular meetings at the highest level and creation of more institutional and structural mechanisms between the two governments. From the Indian side, there seems to be a political consensus among major political parties so far as dealing with China is concerned. Sino-Indian relation is complex. It is adversarial, not that everything is hunky-dory in the relationship between the two. There are irritants, and there are core-interests on which there is no convergence. At the end of the day, however, the convergence of interests outweighs the divergence. The relationship between the two is certainly better than what it is between China and Japan, or China and the USA., although these are dissimilar comparisons. Given the present political trust between the two countries, both New Delhi and Beijing certainly can manage their relationship well without jeopardising it. It is in the larger interest of the two countries to resolve the long-standing border-dispute, which will certainly go a long way in promoting better relationship between the two.