

New Turn In China-India Relations

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If there's one thing that can be said confidently about Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to India, it's that it surpassed some of the upbeat expectations it had raised. The true measure of its success doesn't lie in the two governments' commitment to doubling their bilateral trade to \$40 billion by 2010, nor even in the remarkably large number (13) of agreements they signed on issues as varied as science, space exploration, agriculture, education, tourism and nuclear energy. Rather, it lies in the fact that they confirmed they have more in common than earlier imagined, and resolved to build a broad-horizon relationship in a remarkably relaxed manner.

Mr Hu came here against an unfortunate backdrop: Ambassador Sun Yuxi's statement reiterating China's claim to Arunachal Pradesh. But the negative effect of this undiplomatic repetition of Beijing's old position was soon wiped out. Mr Hu made it clear that for Beijing, the significance of the Sino-Indian relationship is not merely bilateral, nor defined by political expediency. It views it "from a strategic and long-term perspective". He used these very words in describing Sino-Pakistan relations, which have traditionally been far closer.

India had four major concerns arising from recent developments: China's position on common river waters, especially the Brahmaputra, which it is allegedly diverting; Beijing's commitment to delinking its relations with Pakistan from those with India; its likely stand on Asian-level cooperation involving India; and China's attitude to the United States-India nuclear deal and to India's claim to a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

All four concerns were addressed during Mr Hu's visit. India and China agreed to set up an expert-level committee on four rivers, including the Brahmaputra. Mr Hu repeatedly emphasised that the principle of separation in China's relations with India and Pakistan remains important and informs the wide-ranging agenda that New Delhi and Beijing have agreed to pursue.

China also supported India's proposals for greater coordination between the "BCIM countries" (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) and the so-called East Asia Initiative. This means China is prepared to accommodate India in Southeast and East Asia as a dialogue partner.

Most important, Mr Hu assured Indian leaders that China would not stand in the way of getting the US-India nuclear deal approved in the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers' Group, of which it is a member. Nor does China oppose India's Security Council bid, although matters are complicated by India's G-4 strategy: China doesn't want Japan to be a permanent Council member.

It would be naive to expect China to proactively recommend the nuclear deal to the NSG-unless the Group makes a generic, not India-specific, exception to its nuclear commerce norms. In all likelihood, China will wait to see how other Group members react before it reveals its own position. But it's not insignificant that China won't lead the opposition to India-as it did after the 1998 nuclear tests. It's equally important to note that a Sino-Indian civilian nuclear cooperation agreement would have been inconceivable only a few years ago.

Evidently, China has decided to change its earlier strategy to contain India because it recognises India's growing global importance and influence. It's in this light that we must see Mr Hu's

pronouncements during his public address in Delhi, where he stressed India and China's "common interests" in democratising international relations and "developing multilateral cooperation for creating a multi-polar world." Mr Hu said China doesn't seek "any selfish gains" in South Asia, but wants to play "a constructive role" in promoting peace and development in the region.

He also said: "No matter what happens in the international environment, China will remain a champion of peace, development and cooperation. It will continue to pursue an independent foreign policy of peace, peaceful development, and ... win-win progress." He said the development endeavours of China and India are "not mutually exclusive. China sincerely welcomes India's development, supports a greater role for India in international affairs, and sincerely wishes India even greater achievements in the years to come." It's hard to dismiss all this as mere rhetoric calculated to deceive India and the rest of the world. The Chinese leadership is acutely aware that the whole wide world is watching China and India as emerging Great Powers which are home to two-fifths of humanity. A summit meeting between them today makes headline news the world over. We must wait and watch how China conducts its actual diplomacy with India in the near future. But there is little doubt that its foreign policy stance has already shifted significantly.

This opens up a historic opportunity for India and China to transform their relationship from one of rivalry in the past, to a fruitful partnership today. India would be ill-advised to play a "balance-of-power game" with China, as it is being urged to do by our pitifully pro-US strategic experts who have no compunctions in demanding that India enter into a junior partnership with Washington, which will, among other things, contain and counter China.

This is not to argue that all's well with the Sino-Indian relationship. Several outstanding disputes and disagreements remain. The border dispute cannot be wished away. But it's undeniable that India and China are closer than ever to resolving it. While they must make a sincere attempt at its resolution, India should not allow the dispute to come in the way of deepening its relations with China in other areas-including trade, investment, cultural exchanges, science and technology collaboration, and greater people-to-people interaction.

India shouldn't be overly concerned at the growth of Sino-Pakistan relations and Mr Hu's signing of 18 separate agreements in Islamabad. China and Pakistan have long seen themselves as strategic partners or allies and had a qualitatively special military relationship. This is now reflected in China's offer to sell airborne warning and control systems (AWACS) to Pakistan, presumably to help it match India's growing capacities, themselves aided by Israel and the US. India too has its allies, supporters and arms providers.

We are often reminded by China-baiters that China probably transferred some clandestine nuclear technology to Pakistan in the 1980s. But China also sold heavy water to India, not to speak of enriched uranium for Tarapur. It's unlikely that today's China, keen to appear a "responsible" global player, will want to behave the way it earlier did.

It would be imprudent to let past perceptions and attitudes intrude into the present to a point where no cooperative relationship can be built with China on normal, honourable and respectable terms. Indian policy-makers must also discount the new propaganda which says China is "encircling" India, by building a base at Gwadar in Balochistan. India has too much military strength to feel seriously intimidated by any of this.

Yet ironically, some of those who would like India to sustain a relationship of hostility with China demand that India should follow a completely amoral, realpolitik-based foreign policy approach, exactly like China does! Our best bet lies in Machiavellian tactics based on the "enemy's enemy is a friend" premise. We shouldn't hesitate to emulate China's cynicism-most blatantly visible when

Beijing joined hands with the US against the former Soviet Union.

This is a recipe for colossal stupidity and for removing the moral backbone from foreign policy-making altogether. It'll reduce India's complex broad-horizon foreign policy to a petty exercise in promoting the "national interest"-defined totally arbitrarily. India won't earn the respect of the world if it behaves parochially, without reference to universal principles and values. It will damage its own world standing, and in the long run, even its narrow self-interest.

India can choose a radically different approach. It can bring to bear on its foreign policy all its great strengths: as a long, continuous civilisation; as the world's largest democracy; as one of its most diverse and plural societies; its history as a campaigner for great causes like decolonisation, nuclear disarmament and abolition of apartheid and hegemonism, and an ardent advocate of a New International Economic Order, North-South equality, and fair trade. This will impart a sharp moral edge to India's policy and help it contribute to making the world a better place.

Can our leaders exploit India's growing strength in the world to demand, along with China, alternative global approaches to economic policy and management of the international order? If they develop radical alternative strategies, that could make a huge difference to the world and open up avenues of non-market-based development appropriate to the needs of underprivileged peoples and voiceless countries.

But this demands a radical change in domestic policies in the first place, including rejection of market fundamentalism, pursuit of principled secularism, and defence and extension of human rights and freedoms. China's rulers are probably too devoted to elitism and market-based strategies to summon up the will to do any of this. But are India's rulers ready?

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China, India Make Progress - at No Cost to Pakistan

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NEW DELHI - At the end of an important week-long visit by Chinese President Hu Jintao to South Asia, what does the complicated triangular relationship among Beijing, New Delhi, and Islamabad, three of Asia's four nuclear powers, look like?

Going by conventional wisdom, and most media reports, there was a sharp contrast between the relatively lackluster, businesslike reception that Hu got in India and the euphoric welcome that he received in Pakistan. In New Delhi, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh did not turn up to greet him on his arrival. In Islamabad, the entire cabinet, led by President Pervez Musharraf did, to a thundering 21-gun salute.

Hu signed a record 18 agreements with Pakistan; with India, only 13. The Sino-Pakistan agreements had a strong military-strategic component, unlike the accords China signed with India.

However, on deeper analysis, Hu's visit to India was probably far more important and represented a

bigger breakthrough than his visit to Pakistan.

"Hu landed in India shortly after the Chinese ambassador to India made a rather unfortunate reference to China's claim to Arunachal Pradesh, which India says is part of its territory in the Northeast," says Manoranjan Mohanty, co-chairman of the Institute of Chinese Studies in New Delhi. "But within a day, the negative impact of the statement had vanished."

Argues Mohanty: "There is simply no doubt that India and China significantly widened the scope of mutual cooperation in several areas, including agriculture, education, tourism, and even nuclear energy. It appears that India and China now seek to go beyond a better bilateral relationship. They're aware of the impact that they could together make on what Hu calls the 'emerging multipolarity' in the world."

However, it was far from clear if China and India, home to two-fifths of humanity, will together leverage their growing economic, military, and political strength to make reforms in the global order, although they are uniquely placed to do so in the current international situation.

China was positive on certain regional agendas suggested by India, including greater coordination among the "BCIM" countries (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) and the so-called East Asia Initiative.

Indian policymakers are particularly pleased at China's response to their proposals for extended bilateral cooperation, including one for setting up an expert-level committee on the waters of four rivers, including the Brahmaputra, which originates on the Tibetan plateau. (Earlier, there were reports that China is planning to divert water flows into the Brahmaputra.)

Most important of all, India has concluded from its discussions with China that Beijing would not stand in the way of getting the United States-India nuclear deal from being approved by the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group, of which it is a member. However, India did not specifically solicit China's support on the issue and will not do so until the precise shape of the deal becomes clear in the U.S. Congress, which is debating it.

"I think many positive signals emerged from the China-India discussions in New Delhi," says C.V. Ranganathan, India's former ambassador to China and convener of India's National Security Advisory Board. "These were no less important than the signals that emanated from Islamabad a little later. In fact, the language Hu used in the two capitals was identical."

In Islamabad, Hu said: "China will continue to view its relations with Pakistan from a strategic and long-term perspective." In New Delhi, he said he sought better relations with India not as a matter of political expediency, but saw them "from a strategic and long-term perspective."

Ranganathan believes the China and India "are acutely aware of the likely impact of their relationship at the global and regional level" and are looking forward to strengthening their mutual cooperation.

Especially significant is the growing potential for Sino-Indian trade, which is currently running at \$20 billion and is expected to double in the next four years. China hopes to raise its trade volume with Pakistan more modestly, from the current \$4.5 billion to \$15 billion by 2010.

In one commercial respect, however, Pakistan has done better than India. This is an agreement for free trade between China and Pakistan and a special economic zone near Lahore. Indian policymakers are somewhat skeptical about the likely benefits of a free trade arrangement with China, which keeps its currency deliberately undervalued.

China, which describes itself as an “all-weather friend” of Pakistan, has offered to build six more nuclear power reactors in Pakistan, in addition to the existing 350 Mw plant at Chashma and another reactor that it is now constructing.

Although India has not signed a specific agreement on buying Chinese reactors, the two governments have agreed to explore civilian nuclear cooperation. This is considered a significant confidence-building measure: China has been deeply suspicious of India’s nuclear pursuits and was sharply critical of India’s nuclear tests of May 1998. Some Indian analysts see the new nuclear cooperation agreement as New Delhi’s way of neutralizing China’s opposition.

In the military field, China and Pakistan have further strengthened their already well-developed relationship. China has agreed to sell Pakistan airborne warning and control systems (AWACS), presumably to match India’s growing collaboration with Israel in this regard. China will also jointly build with Pakistan a new fighter plane called the JF-17 Thunder.

However, China has been at pains to stress that it will not allow its growing relations with either of the two of South Asian countries to jeopardize its ties with the other. “This important break came 10 years ago during President Jiang Zemin’s visit to India and Pakistan,” says Mohanty. “China has since built further on this principle of separation to normalize its relations with India despite several disputes and irritants.”

Among these are border disputes which go back 50 years, over which India and China fought a war in 1962. China is not pleased with India’s support for the Dalai Lama, who has a government in exile in India. During Hu’s visit, India clamped down on Tibetan protesters.

The two governments have agreed to put the border dispute on the back burner for the moment. But they are much closer to an agreement to resolve the dispute than ever before.

In the arena of global trade, they have agreed to coordinate their positions in the Doha round of World Trade Organization talks.

In India, Hu outlined a broad perspective: “The course we chart and the pace of our development have major implications for peace and development of Asia and beyond,” he said, stressing India and China’s “common interests” in advancing “multipolarity” in the world and democratizing international relations.

Hu said China does not seek “any selfish gains” in South Asia, and wants to play “a constructive role” in promoting peace and development in the region.

“No matter what happens in the international environment, China will remain a champion of peace, development, and cooperation,” Hu said. “It will continue to pursue an independent foreign policy of peace, peaceful development, and opening-up strategy for mutual benefit and win-win progress.”

Hu said that the development endeavors of China and India are “not mutually exclusive. China sincerely welcomes India’s development, supports a greater role for India in international affairs, and sincerely wishes India even greater achievements in the years to come.” This was seen as a welcome signal in India.

“The real question is whether Chinese and Indian leaders have the resolve to exploit their growing strength in the world to demand alternative approaches in the domains of economic policy, conflict resolution by peaceful means, and opposition to hegemonism,” argues Lawrence Surendra, a former UNESCO consultant and a scholar of North-South relations, currently based in Mysore.

“If they show that vision and the will to develop radical strategies, they could make a huge difference to the world,” adds Surendra. “But this means that their leaders will have to follow non-market-based economic approaches domestically, and try to provide a countervailing force to the U.S-dominated security order globally. It’s not clear that they can summon up the will. But they have made a good beginning even if it’s hesitant and tentative.”

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