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# A Perspective on India-China Relations

SRR Aiyengar

*The current domestic condition and the international situation are to our advantage. We must adhere to the independent foreign policy of peace and strive to create a favorable environment for China's modernization and peaceful reunification of the motherland. We will never permit other countries to impose their social system and ideology on us.*

— Jiang Zemin

## Introduction

China as an ascendant power generates concern, fear and mistrust both among the major powers and other countries. Its burgeoning economic growth, fuelling an equally burgeoning military modernisation substantially enhancing its trans-border capabilities has sent wake-up calls, particularly to the United States, Japan and India. China is following a two-pronged strategy in which it attempts to reassure neighbours of its peaceful intentions, even while pressing ahead with huge military expenditure. Now that China stands poised to emerge as a global power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the international community is uncertain about China's intentions, despite all the peace rhetoric that emanates from its political leaders and state organs.

Much diplomatic water has flowed under the bridge of Sino-Indian relations since 1962 and we need to take a pragmatic view of it. Such a view needs to be informed by an appreciation of the several common features that India and China share as civilisational entities which are trying to cope with modernisation of their traditional societies, on the one hand, and the process of integrating with the international system, on the other. China is not only an important civilisation

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'out there', it is India's largest neighbour 'right here'. Thus, there is a need for making independent assessments of China's capabilities and intentions rather than borrowed judgments made from different strategic viewpoints.

## China's National Objectives

China is guided by its national interests, as enunciated by Deng Xiaoping, who had said, "Strategy is built around national interests and we should raise a great fuss about historical grievances and about differences in social systems and ideology. We must build our strategies on future interests of the nation".<sup>1</sup> These were identified as under:

- Security and sovereignty of the nation. This is a precondition for survival and development.
- Honour of the nation, implying no foreign occupation or dictation.
- Well-being of the Chinese people, signifying the importance of economic development.

Flowing out of the above national interests, some of the national objectives that could be discerned are:<sup>2</sup>

- *Achieve 'Great Power Status' by Mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century*: In the near future, China would strive for 'near parity' in economy, technology, defence and other determinants of national power with the other developed countries, with the overall aim of achieving 'great power/super power' status by 2025AD.
- *Safeguard the National Territory and Sovereignty of China*: This would include its intention of recovering its lost territories. It may well have the hidden agenda of resolving border disputes and other historical claims always from a position of strength.
- *Guide National Construction and Development*: This could be China's motivation to pursue unhindered economic progress with adept employment of diplomatic skills at both the regional and international levels. China has fully realised that economic prosperity is the key to power in the future.
- *Comprehensive National Power (CNP)*: This underlies China's desire to gain strength from progress in economy, technology, diplomacy, politics, defence, and develop power to pursue her national interests. Mao's well known dictum that "power flows from the barrel of the gun" has been fully realised in China's nuclear postures. In its own perception, China felt that only the possession of nuclear weapons capability would compel other major powers to treat it as an equal power.

- *Secure Energy Supplies*: China's concern for the increased demand commensurate with its growing economy has influenced China's foreign policy postures.

### **China's Evolving Interests in the Subcontinent**

We need to appreciate that for over a millennium, the “overpowering obligation” felt by Chinese rulers has been to preserve the unity of their civilisation, that irrespective of the type of regime—Manchu, Republic, or Communist—there can be no compromise in their cultural attitudes about ‘power and authority’. It should also be noted that with 13 countries along its 22,000-km border, the basic need even today, is a secure and stable environment so as to safeguard its political and economic development.

From a Chinese foreign policy perspective, while its principal objective in South Asia is avoiding a military confrontation with India, it has sought to enhance the autonomy of the smaller South Asian nations. Hence, while China will not accept Indian hegemony or a sphere of influence, neither will it get itself involved with India over another South Asian state. Since China shares its borders with South Asian states, for Beijing, “peace on the Southern periphery,” is an important regional objective. Thus, given the geographical contiguity, China is extremely interested in the stability on the subcontinent. This explains the relatively restrained nature of its engagement with some of the smaller South Asian states, conscious of not amplifying Indian threat perceptions.

Here one would like to make instructive inferences from the recent visit of President Hu Jintao to the subcontinent. He classified his trip to Pakistan as a trip to “South Asia,” indicative of a nuanced transition in Chinese diplomacy. Hu also articulated interest in Chinese engagement in the South Asia region, without discriminating between the regional states. He went on to clarify that China did not want to make any “selfish gains” in South Asia and favoured the peace process between India and Pakistan. This nuanced stance was a signal to Pakistan and the other smaller South Asian states that an anti-India policy will not receive any support from China, and for New Delhi, that China would not use its influence

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or growing relations with the South Asian states in anti-India activities. Notwithstanding all these pronouncements, we do see some aggressive tactical posturing against India of late.

China's New Security Concept (NSC), whose core rationale is stated to be "to conduct dialogue, consultation, and negotiation on an equal footing.... To solve disputes and safeguard peace. Only by developing a new security concept and establishing a fair and reasonable new international order can world peace and security be fundamentally guaranteed." Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao reiterated this concept in an interview with an Indian journalist in 2003 when he said, "China stands for a new security concept which features mutual interest, mutual benefit, equality and coordination. By mutual trust, we mean that countries should trust each other, rise above their differences in ideology or social system and go for regular dialogue and consultation with respect to their own security and defence policies. By mutual benefit, we mean that a country, while pursuing its own security interests, should respect those of others. By equality, we mean that all countries should treat each other as equal and there should be more transparency in international relations. By coordination, we mean that all countries should endeavor to eliminate hidden dangers of war through cooperation and to resolve disputes through peaceful dialogues." It is also a well considered opinion amongst the strategic 'think-tanks' in China that Beijing appreciates that relations with India are now to be considered the highest priority for it fulfills four basic parameters of being a developing country, a neighbouring country, a rising power, and an influential actor on the international stage and, hence, its diplomatic energies need to be suitably focussed. No doubt, the border is an important issue in bilateral ties, but it is no longer the only issue and both sides have agreed to live with it while seeking a political solution.

## **Chinese Perceptions of India**

China's negative perceptions of India which often find articulation, especially when bilateral relations deteriorate, include that the 1962 armed conflict was entirely the product of Indian unreasonableness and aggressiveness; India is not fully reconciled to the situation in Tibet notwithstanding its stated policy; India is seeking domination of South Asia that would preclude China from pursuing its legitimate interests in its neighbourhood; India is a poor country but its leaders, instead of solving its economic problems, seek to maximise its military power in

pursuit of their “hegemonic” objectives; and India is deliberately using the myth of a Chinese threat to find a pretext for its nuclear ambitions. China views India’s nuclear tests not as an expression of genuine security concerns but a product of domestic politics and India’s desire for international prestige.

However, China would like to engage India globally on issues that aid China’s strategy on the World Trade Organisation (WTO), human rights, environment and multipolarity in international relations. We witnessed the joint efforts by both China and India along with Brazil and South Africa in the recently concluded Climate Change Summit at Copenhagen. The following purely pragmatic considerations have led China’s leadership to pursue a policy of improving relations:

- The fact that India is the second most populous state with which China shares a long and yet unsettled border.
- India has emerged as the most powerful state in its southern periphery.
- India’s has historic links with the Tibetan issue.
- India, like China, has relentlessly pursued the goal of becoming an autonomous major power in the international system.
- India is now a nuclear weapons power, which has made no secret of the fact that its nuclear weapons programme was being designed in the context of its threat perception from China.
- India’s economy is now growing at a reasonable rate, with a particularly impressive achievement in the Information Technology (IT) Sector.

## **Encirclement of India**

China’s growing interest, including sale of military hardware in India’s neighbourhood is a cause of concern amongst the strategic and defence analysts in India. Chinese presence and interest in Myanmar, and sale of military hardware to Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal are at times seen in an adverse light. The entire issue of relations between China and India’s neighbours should be seen in the backdrop of geo-political realities and legitimate fears and apprehensions of the smaller nations. They feel that India, being a larger neighbour, tends to ignore minor disputes with them. The natural tendency is to look for other avenues and in this context, China is the most obvious choice. China is already a great power with a vast emerging market. As its economy grows, there would be a greater demand for energy resources. China’s strategy to acquire port facilities for its navy in Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka has been also called China’s “String of Pearls” by some Western analysts. On the other hand, establishment of

the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which is widely perceived as a useful medium of regional cooperation and coordination of views on issues of shared interests, is dominated by India. It is in India's interest to strengthen this forum. Arms sales to the neighbouring countries have again to be viewed as a legitimate activity by the smaller nations to acquire cheaper arms as also to reduce dependence on India. The trouble creating potential of these smaller neighbours, being minimal, should be ignored by a more confident and powerful India. Myanmar is crucial to India's "Look East" policy and relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. Northeast India comprises seven Indian states, which are relatively underdeveloped due to years of neglect and isolation. India needs to develop a viable economic strategy to develop the region and link its trade through Bangladesh and Myanmar with the southeastern and southern provinces of China and further on, the ASEAN countries. Resource rich Myanmar offers a wide range of opportunities to kick-start the economy of the Indian northeast. The political leadership needs to take up this momentous decision in which there is an element of risk and challenge but the dividends are bountiful. There is also a need for India to engage, and upgrade its relationship with, the US, Russia, Japan, Vietnam and the Central Asian Republics for mutual benefit and also to keep China in discreet check.

## **India-China Border Dispute**

No commentary on India-China relations would be complete without a discussion on the border dispute that exists between the two countries. The great natural defensive line of northern India, the mighty Himalayas, separating Tibet from northeast India, is a barrier which, by tradition, was impenetrable. This defensive line is embodied by the 1914 MacMahon Line, India's non-negotiable interest. Further, the 1914 alignment, aside from its strategic sanctity, also upholds the ethnic and linguistic affinities to people south of it, who are distinct from the homogeneous Tibetan or the Han people. Similarly, from the Chinese perspective, it too is in possession of its non-negotiable interest—the Aksai Chin Plateau. And therein lies the essence of what some call the "East-West" swap.

*The McMahon Line (1914):* The year 1914 was a seminal moment in the history of the frontiers between India and China. The British had sponsored a tripartite conference at Simla in October 1913. The Chinese attended very reluctantly, but the Tibetans arrived quite eagerly as they were now engaged with their Chinese suzerains. Henry McMahon, foreign secretary to the Government of India, led the British delegation. McMahon was believed to be an expert at

drawing boundary lines, having spent two years demarcating the Durand Line as the Northwest Frontier. The boundary line that followed in July 1914, the now famous McMahon Line, extended the territory of British India up to the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. It may be noted that the McMahon Line was constructed on a map on the scale of 8 inches to a mile with a thick nib dipped in red ink. The contemporary implication is that this is hard to transpose on the ground. And since the thickness of the line represents a width of about six miles on the ground, differences over its actual demarcation would have been confined within a very narrow limit and would have been easily reconcilable. The Line followed the main geographical features approximating to the traditional border between Tibet and India and the semi-independent tribes under the control of the Government of India, and as far as possible, it divides exactly the territory occupied by people of Tibetan origin from that inhabited by the Miris, Abors, and Daphlas within the British sphere of influence. In the aftermath of the Simla Conference, the Chinese soon forcefully repudiated the convention and the map with it. Beijing has often repeated the charge “that New Delhi had inherited the legacy of the British Empire, whose policy of continuous and unabashed aggression on China’s frontiers was no secret.”<sup>3</sup>

Forty-eight years after 1962, and a quarter of a century of negotiations later, the 4,056 km border between India and China, one of the longest interstate borders in the world, remains unresolved. The secrecy that surrounds these border talks precludes serious analysis on the nature and content of these discussions, except at the highest levels. The next step in this arduous process is “exchanging maps indicating their respective perceptions of the entire alignment of the Line of Actual Control (LAC).” So far, each side has only clarified by exchange of maps, its line in the middle sector. For the remaining two sectors, there is no mutually agreed upon LAC. At an operational level, this means that there is no mutual agreement on where Indian and Chinese troops have a legal right to be positioned. The comments of our former National Security Adviser (NSA), Mr. MK Narayanan in an interview in January 2207, are worth noting, “In the McMahon Line itself, because of modern cartographic innovations and what not, there will be changes in it. There may be certain amount of changes with regard to the agreement that we may reach. It is possible that there may be some amount of changes in the territory.” The so-called intrusions by either side over time have, thus, been primarily the result of conflicting interpretations of the McMahon Line. It appears that each side is presently trying to ensure a clear presence along its version of the LAC, and once this is achieved, both sides

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will cartographically present their respective LAC to the other side. Finally, for reasons of geography and climate, the entire Sino-Indian border (unlike, for instance, the Sino-Russian border) cannot be fully manned by either side throughout the year. Thus, certain disputed pockets will occasionally get intruded upon by both sides in the absence of an undemarcated border. However, it is important to note that these intrusions are occurring in the backdrop of two major confidence-building measures (CBMs) of 1993 and 1996. Thus, while military assault (threat of invasion) by either side is no longer considered a serious possibility, and even less so in the nuclear dimension, incursions

on the disputed segments do have a tactical rationale insofar they buttress each side's version of the LAC.<sup>4</sup>

### **India-China Trust Deficit**

News about border incursions by Chinese troops has recently become the routine in the Indian media, TV, discussions, online forums. Various Indian TV news channels are airing news as well as news analysis about recent developments in India and China relations. Prominent among the news had been Indian government support for the visit of the Dalai Lama to Tawang, the world's second largest Buddhist pilgrimage place, second only to Tibet. Last year, in 2009, amid growing distrust between India and China, the Indian government allowed him to visit Tawang. This was seen as proactive diplomacy by the Indian government by many intellectuals. Arunachal Pradesh is the area which is claimed by China, mainly due to Tawang. Various Western pundits are also of the opinion that China's recent tough posturing against India is due to its growing nervousness about a growing India, economically and militarily. A few weeks ago, there was an analysis by a "Chinese" think-tank advocating the breaking-up of India into many parts, and supporting separatist organisations, especially in northeast India. Though both countries played down the analysis, the damage was done.

The atmosphere over the border issue had also become somewhat tense recently following media reports that the Government of India had sanctioned the raising of two more mountain divisions for deployment in Arunachal Pradesh and that some aircraft of the Indian Air Force had been deployed for the defence

of Arunachal Pradesh. The Government of India has also embarked on a crash programme for the development of the road infrastructure in the Arunachal Pradesh area. All these measures, which are of a purely defensive nature, were decided upon by the Government of India in reaction to the development of the road infrastructure in Tibet, the construction of the railway line to Lhasa and reports that China plans to extend this railway line from Lhasa to the Indian border and to connect its road network in Tibet with the Nepalese road network. Till four years ago, the Government of India had given low priority to the development of road and other military-related infrastructure in Arunachal Pradesh in order to avoid bilateral tensions on this issue when the border talks were going on. But reports that China was strengthening its military-related infrastructure in Tibet led to a decision to take defensive measures in the Arunachal Pradesh area. An increase in the number of Chinese troop intrusions into Indian territory in this area also contributed to this decision. Despite this, the political leaders of both India and China have shown wisdom in not allowing the border dispute to affect bilateral relations in other fields. Notwithstanding attempts to increase the comfort level, there is still a trust deficit. Suspicions of each other's intentions and motives in matters such as China's military and nuclear related relationship with Pakistan and India's strategic relationship with the US and Japan continue to cast a shadow on the political relations and come in the way of a mutually acceptable border compromise. Reported cyber snooping by the Chinese, in that computer systems of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) were also hacked further increased the trust deficit. China's interest in a naval base—Gwadar or Hambantota or elsewhere—is also a disturbing trend in its power projection in the Indian Ocean.

### **Indian Interests in Engaging China**

India's power has been growing as a result of economic reforms. India could become the world's largest market, displacing China, and Asia's second most formidable military power after China. India has the strategic vision to realise that it has the potential to play a significant role in the Asian balance of power and, hence, needs a stable and peaceful neighbourhood to build linkages with important players based on congruence of strategic interests. A cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with China was, therefore, inevitable as the current mantra is on geo-economics in the globalised era. India also requires the strategic space by buying peace with its powerful northern neighbour so as to deal effectively with a belligerent Pakistan.

At the government level, both China and India have adopted practical and flexible policies to ensure that the ongoing parleys do not become impediments to the development of friendly relations. The relationship has become more mature, in sharp contrast to the emotional approach earlier, due to their differences on the boundary question. This maturity augurs well for the future and is an important stabilising factor in maintaining peace, harmony and progress in the South Asian region. Historic rivalries and their strategic cultures suggest that a fair amount of tension and competition between these continent sized neighbours is inevitable. The ongoing economic reforms in India and China could decisively transform these countries into economic powerhouses. The nuanced change in the stance of both India and China in recent years has set the trajectory for a more dynamic and cooperative coexistence.

A majority of Indians seem to carry in their minds a more mixed picture, with both positive and negative ingredients and, hence, there is an extremely slow progress on normalisation of relations. Some defence and foreign policy analysts in India recommend caution while dealing with China. They cite the fact that China occupies a part of Indian territory in Ladakh and claims large areas in Arunachal Pradesh which cannot be ignored and remain potential flashpoints. Continued military collaboration with Pakistan and inroads with Myanmar are also of strategic concern to India.

## **Outlook for the Future and Approach in Dealing with China**

In the decades ahead, the India-China equation will profoundly affect regional and global security. A certain amount of competition is inevitable in an equation between two large neighbours. The challenge for both countries is to ensure that their competition does not spill into open confrontation. The manner in which the Indian political leadership manages to engage China will determine the future security environment in the region. A seven-prong future trend matrix could be:

- Strong economic growth in both India and China, and their improving diplomatic and trade relations, have led many to dub the two countries “Chindia”. Both Chinese and Indian politicians and businessmen will focus on the countries’ complementary industrial nature, particularly in the IT sector where India is said to have the software, and China the hardware.
- Both governments will be committed to regional and sub-regional cooperation, and will bilaterally accord priority to resolving their border

disputes as well as to their partnership in overseas investment, at times, jointly bidding for energy projects.

- Despite the rhetoric, similar regional and global interests mean the two countries will often be in competition. The relationship will be marred by sporadic border disputes and competing geo-political and economic interests in third countries. These concerns manifest themselves in India's reluctance to admit Chinese firms into sensitive industries and China's ambivalence towards India's ambition to secure a permanent seat on the UN Security Council as also to strike a nuclear deal beneficial to India.
- Environmental and water resource issues are likely to become a future cause of contention. Key Indian rivers have their sources in the Chinese Himalayas and the Chinese plans to harness the waters of the Tibetan Plateau will concern India in management of these resources and future intentions.
- While trade relations will continue improving, the relationship is complex and steeped in historical mistrust. Competing interests, combined with concerns over longer-term ambitions, seem likely to hamper future cooperative relations.
- A well-planned and well-executed Chinese cyber attack could do significant damage to India's economy, telecommunications, electric power transmission, financial data, and other vital infrastructure. Our vulnerability to cyber attacks is a critical threat to national security. We need to address these problems and take adequate steps, to reduce our vulnerabilities to these threats. Failing to take taking prompt measures, the fix will become prohibitively expensive and/or our national security will be irreversibly compromised.
- China is giving mixed signals, but it would be in India's interests to continue 'engaging' China. We should, at the same time, take all necessary steps to protect our strategic interests; India's revised defence strategy proves that it is prepared to do it. While admittedly, nuclear weapons are political and not exclusively military weapons, we need to ensure that the nuclear deterrence capabilities we have remain in place and are credible. Wedded as we are to the doctrine of "no first use" of nuclear weapons, the recent successful trials of the Agni III missile have certainly added muscle to our deterrence capabilities.

The Pakistan strategic establishment which has courted outside intervention in the South Asian region throughout its history, is now on the

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back foot. It apprehends that outside engagement in the region is going in India's favour. It would be of utmost advantage to India if the discourse in South Asian politics moves from power politics to the wider and deeper economic engagements. Tough all-weather friendship between Pakistan and China is a worry for the Indian leadership. A slight strategic tension may be in India's interest as it provides leverage vis-à-vis Indo-US relations. However, it would be imprudent to let the relationship be marred by mutual suspicion on matters of history.

### **Conclusion**

One of the more perplexing issues of the Indian foreign policy is anticipating the future trajectory of Sino-Indian relations. Despite the year 2006 being designated as the "Year of Friendship", mutual suspicion persists. India's goal of emerging as a great power is crucially dependent on the grand strategy of dealing with the rising China. Both India and China have agreed to resolve the boundary dispute through peaceful and friendly consultations and neither side shall use or threaten to use force against the other by any means. However, Chinese foreign policy is too strategically savvy to forge a strategic partnership with India. A cursory analysis of the international political discourse awards a fairly higher status to China than to India. The joint statement signed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Premier Wen Jinbao in April 2005 said, "The Chinese side reiterated that India is an important developing country and is having an increasingly important influence in the international arena." An important developing country is all the recognition that China is willing to render to India under the prevalent scenario.

Given China's territorial size, population (a fifth of the human race) and economic dynamism, few can question or grudge its right to be a world power. China can also be a positive influence in Asia. But it can just as easily become the biggest geo-political problem. China's rise thus presents both an opportunity and a threat.<sup>5</sup> While the contrast between the two neighbours in terms of military power and strategic weapons is glaring, the civilian leadership on both sides is doing the balancing act. Indian expectations of China would be China displaying sensitivity on what matters most to Indians, while accepting that

we cannot agree on all issues just yet. It is important as well to keep reminding ourselves that China and India continue to have a substantial convergence of interests. As the two countries are negotiating a political settlement for the border dispute, there is a need to focus on positive areas. The border dispute should not be allowed to impede either bilateral cooperation or convergence on global issues. Also, as the Chinese value and respect strength, the more recent aggressive tactical posturing by them must be responded to with equally resolute grit and strength, both diplomatically and militarily. While engaging China in enhanced economic activities, India should strengthen its guard over the Indian Ocean Region. Avoiding a confrontation with China is desirable. But ceding ground is absolutely not. While advocating no let-up in India's preparation to counter any possible Chinese misadventure, India also needs to change the way in which advice is tendered to the government so that the Services' concerns are adequately represented to ensure that the nation's defence is not compromised.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

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