

India-China Relations: Time Not Ripe for a Prime Ministerial Visit

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Summary

The Indian Prime Minister presenting himself in China, without waiting for the Chinese to respond substantively to his demarches as well as for the potential convergences in the fluid external situation to crystallise, would compound the misstep of endorsing the vacuous “strategic partnership” his government had inherited. His visit must take place in extremely well prepared and ‘ripened’ circumstances, after there is clarity on China’s response on vital Indian strategic concerns. Not in a routine fashion or in the name of ‘exploring’ new openings. There have been too many ‘explorations’ and too little of ‘deliverances’ in India-China relations. The time for that kind of interaction at the level of the Heads of Government is long past. It is time now for India to seek and secure delivery on promises dangled previously but kept dangling.

Talk of a visit to China by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in the air. The Chinese are said to be pressing for it in early 2015, pleading scheduling difficulties later in the year. It will be unfortunate if the Indian side gets busy debating dates dutifully, without addressing the root question – the advisability or inadvisability of the idea, as such, from a strategic perspective.

This is no knee jerk hawkishness on China. India-China relations are *sui generis*, quite unlike any other bilateral relationship. High level visits need to be carefully prepared, more than in the case of other countries. This is especially so in the present circumstances when the relationship is in a state of flux – with a fresh, clearing of the cobwebs, approach by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Government in India on the one hand, and potentially far-reaching political developments in the offing both in China's neighbourhood and globally on the other.

A full scale review of the state of play, both in respect of bilateral relations and China's relations with other countries, Pakistan above all, is called for before any such move is contemplated. And a cramped calendar at the Chinese end during the rest of the year should be the least of the reasons for an early visit.

Boundary Question: The State of Play

President Xi Jinping's September 2014 visit to India, marred by the maladroit Chinese move to stage an intrusion in Ladakh (to make a point about its eventual claim on the border or for any other reason; by the People's Liberation Army or whoever; with or without Xi's knowledge, it doesn't matter), provides the natural point of departure for such a review including its impact on, and implications for, the boundary question, above all.

The question of questions for India is whether China is ready to change its approach to the boundary issue – of calculated procrastination of a settlement now, in deference to the demarche made to the Chinese President by the Indian Prime Minister himself. No great importance can be attached in this connection to verbal expressions of readiness for an early settlement from the Chinese side just before, and during, the Chinese President's visit though. A mature diplomatic establishment would take those remarks as nothing more than ad-libbing, par for the course for the sophisticated style of the Chinese mandarin. The proof of the pudding will lie in the dish actually served for eating, not in the listing put out on a cleverly improvised menu.

That will be known only when the National Security Advisor picks up the thread on the talks – now in their 18th round – in his capacity as the Prime Minister's "Special Representative" (SR). No one outside the small circle of officials involved really knows what has been going on in these 'talks' for over a decade. But, going by the references that surfaced in the various Joint Statements issued during this period, it can be surmised that the Chinese side has succeeded in imparting a routine, self-perpetuating, character to this

mechanism, whose *raison d'être* at the time of its inception was to free the talks of the strait-jacket they had gotten into in the Joint Working Group (JWG) of officials (established with much fanfare in 1988 as a positive outcome of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's 'path-breaking' visit) and explore possibilities of a settlement in a political perspective afresh. Hence the nomenclature "Special Representatives" (of the political principals); but not really different from the JWG, with its political aspect and rationale diluted, and a breakthrough eluding it like the JWG.

This is mainly the result of the methodology followed (at Chinese instance, evidently) – of the paraphernalia of the 'three-stage road map', proceeding 'top-down' from abstractions (such as "principles" and "parameters") to a "framework" for a settlement before getting down to the specifics of territorial adjustments. The utility of this approach is questionable, especially in the light of the experience with the 2005 "Agreement on Political Parameters & Guiding Principles for Settlement of the Boundary Question."

The 2005 Agreement was widely hailed at that time as a breakthrough. This was mainly because of Article VII of the Agreement, which stated that the boundary "should be along well defined and easily identifiable natural geographical features" and that both countries would "safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas" while reaching a "boundary settlement" – a formulation that was naively assumed on the Indian side presaging Chinese readiness to finally drop claims in the Eastern sector (i.e. Arunachal Pradesh) as part of a package deal involving Indian concessions in the Western sector (i.e. Aksai Chin).

However, the very next year China put paid to all such expectations, with its Ambassador in New Delhi publicly (re)asserting claim to the whole of Arunachal Pradesh on the eve of the Chinese President's visit to India. Moreover, the Chinese let it be known informally that any interpretation of Article VII envisaging concessions from their side would not be realistic. And now it is said that much water has flown down the rivers since then.

This despite the fact that the 2005 Joint Statement had promised – nay committed – to pursue "early settlement of the boundary question" as a "strategic objective." It is a feat of Chinese diplomacy that it managed to do just the opposite in less than a year and a half, and without raising eyebrows about the country's standing as a "strategic partner" of India in the Indian discourse!

It is time therefore for the SRs to consider returning to basics in the boundary negotiations, paring them of the padding added in recent years. The top-down approach should be reversed to a 'bottom-up' one (i.e. one beginning with the specifics of the eventual boundary alignment) so as to enable quick movement towards a settlement now finally, and the nitty-gritty remitted to experts for delineation and demarcation at the earliest. That would be a truly 'political' approach, one entailing true 'negotiations' and not just 'talks' or shenanigans such as 'talks about talks' and the like.

This is vital for the health of the India-China relationship and longevity of goodwill. So much so that the next round of SR-level talks must not be fixed mechanically or in a hurry, but only after probings at the diplomatic level (or through an aide) reveal Chinese readiness to move out of the groove the talks have gotten into in recent years and break new ground on the above lines.

Care would need to be taken, moreover, to guard against the Chinese proclivity to press for a public endorsement of the 'progress' made so far, including the 'three-stage road map' approach taken, since that would preclude the much needed rejig and paradigmatic shift to steer clear of formulations vulnerable to varying or conflicting interpretations. The Indian side must go prepared with a clear idea of the alignment of the boundary it would be ready to sign on, and press for it with conviction unhesitatingly. For, the present is a pivotal moment in the relationship, and the time therefore just right for a 'make or break' move for a fresh start, while the SRs (and their principals) – all free of the baggage of the past fortunately — together cogitate on the next steps.

And the Prime Minister's visit, in turn, likewise should be decided upon only after the SRs succeed in breaking new ground, as above – not otherwise.

The boundary question is, however, not the only reason for that recommendation.

Sino-Pakistan Nexus

It has to be remembered that the shadow play relating to the border does not occur in a political vacuum; it takes place in a crass 'confidence deficit' context created by an anything but benign Sino-Pak nexus that continues unfazed and unchanged even after India's acceptance of China as a "strategic partner" in 2005. That factor was also plainly underlined to the Chinese President by the Indian Prime Minister in his reservations regarding the Chinese initiatives for trans-country connectivity with far-reaching strategic implications that China wishes to enlist India for. China's response in this respect will naturally also be a major consideration on the Indian side as it takes stock of the relationship in the post-Xi Jinping visit scenario. The mutual pledge by both countries to show "respect and sensitivity for each other's concerns" – a Chinese contribution to the official lexicon that Indian diplomacy has fallen for quite innocently, and goes along with it as a mantra placed on par with the Panchsheel or Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence – cannot, after all, be a one-sided affair limited to the future of Tibet and Taiwan only.

China's External Environment

Furthermore, China has emerged as a concern for several countries in its neighbourhood thanks to its muscle-flexing on territorial issues in recent years and globally due to its proclivity for resource grabbing. The diplomatic dust raised by the recent round of high-level confabulations in the Asia-Pacific region is yet to settle down. Important decisions

with a bearing on the security architecture of the region are likely to be taken in the coming period, with an eye on the strategic challenge posed by an expansionist China.

India-China Relations in 'Pause' Mode

India would therefore do well to press the 'pause' button to allow all these different factors – bilateral, regional and global – to play themselves out and advance towards maturation in a natural manner. And to use the interregnum to, *inter alia*, radically review its experience of 'normalisation' of relations with China over the last four decades – thrice the time period it interacted with China in the pre-1962 phase – with a view to examining how Chinese diplomacy has succeeded in spinning a web around India, tying it up in knots through abstract formulations and generalities that have a connotation favourable to the Chinese perspective but no clear meaning. And assessing if Indian diplomacy has not been unduly defensive and, accordingly, devising more effective pathways for a more productive engagement with that country in the future. Two aspects are touched upon briefly below in conclusion.

Looking Back to Look Ahead

In particular, we need to ask the question (strangely never raised in our strategic discourse) whether the 1988 decision to give in to China's insistence on setting the boundary question aside and proceeding ahead with the process of improvement of relations, was wise. Until then, the Indian position, during the first decade or so of the normalisation exercise, was essentially just the opposite: in 1979, then Foreign Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had not accepted Deng Xiaoping's plea to leave the boundary question to future generations. In his inimitable style, Vajpayee had countered Deng saying: "*Kal kare so aaj kar, aaj kare so ab.*" The foundations for that commonsensical approach were laid by late President K.R. Narayanan, the first Indian Ambassador to China after 1962, who was hand-picked by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1976 to explore the possibilities of a dignified reconciliation.

But what did India get in return? Some kind of a promise on the settlement of the border at the most but, concretely, only a Joint Working Group to discuss it. That JWG mechanism was discarded after 15 years of hapless strivings in favour of the Special Representatives mechanism, on the ground that only a political approach (capable of thinking beyond set bureaucratic grooves) could resolve the knotty issue. But this too has proved incapable of delivering, with its 17 rounds well set to extend indefinitely.

The same could be said for the 2005 decision to conclude a "strategic partnership". The Chinese would, understandably, have been keen for it – to facilitate their efforts to blur strategic faultlines and sow seeds of confusion on the global strategic landscape. But what was the compulsion for India to concede it, in advance of a settlement on the border and with Sino-Pak relations being what they were (and still are)? That too, ahead of Japan, which had to make do in that same month (April 2005) with no more than a "strategic

orientation" to its "Global Partnership" with India established in 2000, and had to wait for another year and a half until December 2006, to secure a full-fledged "Strategic and Global Partnership" with India? Could the description "constructive and cooperative partnership", already agreed to just two years earlier during the visit of Prime Minister Vajpayee, not have done as well?

As with 1988, the unanswered, indeed unasked, question about 2005 is what did India secure in return for such a major 'give'? And, in any event, what did that step yield, whatever the considerations behind its conception?

Lessons (to be) Learnt

Lessons must be learnt from these (and other) strategic misjudgements, which were anything but astute and betray a peculiar defensiveness and a puzzling tendency to make weighty (permanent) concessions in return for ephemeral gains and promises. They must not be rationalised through trite homilies about the inevitability of engagement in diplomacy; the point is not in favour of or against engagement, but about what kind – the terms – of engagement. Nor must they be justified in the name of *realpolitik* – China's rising economic strength and presumed power potential all round. That too does not hold water, ignoring as it does China's overall political isolation and adverse strategic scenario in its neighbourhood and beyond.

China has been paid its due, and more. It is time to seek tangible returns for the down payments, steering clear of post-dated promises henceforth.

What India-China relations require is a thoughtful course correction, not (intellectually) lazy bumbling into yet another 'symbolism shorn of substance' high-level interaction as if that were an end in itself. That will throw away a historic opportunity of resetting political ties with the nation's powerful northern neighbour to national advantage.

Already, the leverage inherent in the change of incumbency was wasted as a result of inexperience of the government, which ill-advisedly rushed to receive the Chinese Foreign Minister within days of assuming office, and, in the process, unthinkingly endorsed the vacuous "strategic partnership" inherited by it. Holding back on commitment to the strategic partnership, on the unexceptionable ground that the new government needed time to review the state of play, could have fetched the nation a handsome political price for that affirmation, unsolicited.

The Indian Prime Minister presenting himself in China, without waiting for the Chinese to respond substantively to his demarches as well as for the potential convergences in the fluid external situation to crystallise, would compound that misstep. His visit must take place in extremely well prepared and 'ripened' circumstances, after there is clarity on China's response on vital Indian strategic concerns. Not in a routine fashion or in the name of

'exploring' new openings. There have been too many 'explorations' and too little of 'deliverances' in India-China relations. The time for that kind of interaction at the level of the Heads of Government is long past. It is time now for India to seek and secure delivery on promises dangled previously but kept dangling.