

ISAS Brief

No. 267 – 24 January 2013

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



New Focus on Stable China-India Ties

P S Suryanarayana¹

Future-Oriented Defence Talks

China and India have held “forward looking” defence talks in “a friendly and cooperative atmosphere”² in Beijing in the first half of January 2013. Truly significant is the fact that these talks took place amid signs of new belligerence across the Pakistan-India Line of Control (LOC) in Jammu and Kashmir.

Indeed, the Sino-Indian meeting in Beijing on 14 January 2013 served as a counterpoint to the cross-LOC flare-up. Relevant to this reading is the fact that Pakistan counts on China as an “all-weather friend”. India, the other country in focus in this cross-LOC flare-up, is one of China’s mega-state neighbours but not one of Beijing’s designated “all-weather friends”. In this perspective, the latest signs of Sino-Indian bonhomie on matters of defence cooperation do not strengthen or weaken because of any abatement of cross-LOC tensions after mid-January 2013.

¹ Mr P S Suryanarayana is Editor (Current Affairs) at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isaspss@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

² India and China hold Third Annual Defence Dialogue, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Defence (14-January-2013), <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx>. Accessed on 16 January 2013.

It is, therefore, possible to view the meeting between Xu Qiliang, Vice-Chairman of China's powerful Central Military Commission, and India's Defence Secretary, Shashikant Sharma, in Beijing at this time as being noteworthy on two inter-related counts.

One, China has made highly positive comments on its latest defence talks with India at a time of new military tensions across the LOC. This aspect will not amuse Pakistan even if there is no need for alarm bells in Islamabad over these new signs of upswing in Sino-Indian engagement on military matters. For Pakistan, the bottom line in this context is that a substantive Sino-Indian military pact or tie-up is unthinkable at present and in the immediate future. However, the second but important aspect of Sino-Indian defence dialogue is that the incoming Chinese leaders are beginning to view India as a serious player, if not a decisive force, to reckon with in their worldview.

Xi Jinping's Letter to Manmohan Singh

Xi Jinping, the new General Secretary of the long-governing Communist Party of China (CPC), has sent a letter to India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, signalling Beijing's continuing interest in engaging India in a mutually beneficial fashion. Mr Xi's letter was personally delivered to Dr Singh by Dai Bingguo, China's State Councillor, in New Delhi on 10 January 2013. Mr Dai was in New Delhi for a meeting of BRICS High Representatives for Security Issues. (BRICS is a rapidly evolving forum that brings together Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa in a possible but not-yet-definitive inter-continental power bloc.)

Mr Xi's letter to Dr Singh, coincidentally delivered ahead of the latest China-India defence talks in Beijing in mid-January 2013, is emphatic in tone and tenor. Mr Xi has reaffirmed an often-voiced China-India high sentiment of recent years. In this, his letter echoes Hu Jintao, who recently made way for Mr Xi as the CPC's helmsman and will soon transfer power to him as China's President. The new Chinese leader has assured Dr Singh that "the world has enough space for China and India to achieve common development, and the world also needs their common development".³ Such high sentiment, in almost exactly the same words, has been the staple of Sino-Indian exchanges in recent years. Important, however, is that Mr Xi has accepted this diplomatic thesis and expanded it as a "need" of the entire world.

If nothing else, such an assertion by China's new leader reflects his acknowledgment of India as a key interlocutor into the future. Otherwise, there is no reason why he should have sent this letter at all when he is not yet formally at the helm of state affairs in China. In line with such an interpretation, the Xi-letter is emphatic, too, on two other inter-related aspects of

³ Dai Bingguo, 'China and India Should Explore a Way of Maintaining Friendly Coexistence', Foreign Ministry of People's Republic of China (11 January 2013), <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t1005099.shtml>. Accessed on 16 January 2013.

Sino-Indian bilateral ties. One, it has been stated that “China-India relations have maintained stable development in the past few years, which has brought about substantial benefits to the two countries and the two peoples”. Add to this the second key aspect in this sub-text: Mr Xi’s pledge that “China [under his rule] will, as it has been doing [already], attach great importance to developing relations with India, and [China] expects to carry out close cooperation with India to create a brighter future of their bilateral relations”.⁴

Cynicism about ‘Soft Diplomacy’

Inevitably, cynics and sceptics will seek to dismiss Mr Xi’s letter to Dr Singh, the first from the new Chinese leader, as either wishful rhetoric or wilful attempt to mislead India on China’s ‘real intentions’ of arresting India’s rise. Such cynicism and scepticism can be traced to the legacy of Indian interpretations about how China ‘hoodwinked’ India in the 1950s, in the run-up to the 1962 Himalayan war between them, through the soft diplomacy of Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.

Nonetheless, it is possible to advance a strong counter-narrative against the scenario of either India or China or both seeing a ghost in every shadow of doubt about each other’s ‘real intentions’ into the future. Such a counter-narrative can be built upon the foundation of a current reality. It is perhaps unwise, certainly difficult, to dismiss this reality which was outlined by Mr Dai in his meeting with Dr Singh in New Delhi on 10 January 2013. Mr Dai said that “in the past 10 years, China and India have seen great development in their bilateral relations. The two countries have efficiently controlled their disputes and differences [–] and have pushed forward [the] development of bilateral relations, while gradually finding a pragmatic way of maintaining friendly relationship of coexistence between them”.⁵

Regardless of whether India and China have been “efficient” in controlling their disputes in the past decade, it is true that the two countries have not gravitated towards a serious military clash. Any such clash might have turned the clock back on their incremental bilateral diplomacy and blooming trade ties. Bilateral trade is more favourable to China right now, while the diplomatic engagement is not one-sided. Moreover, there is ample evidence that India and China have “gradually” moved towards a “pragmatic” state of “coexistence”.

Surely, the current state of Sino-Indian “coexistence” does not match the heady (and eventually, failed) rhetoric of yore about ‘Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai’ (‘India-China fraternal affinity’). In recent years, serious differences have indeed arisen now and then over issues ranging from maps of the two countries to Beijing’s differential treatment of certain categories of Indians for the purpose of issuing Chinese visas. However, there has been no decisive or irreversible lurch towards the kind of bilateral bitterness which first silenced the

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

‘Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai’ crescendo and then preceded, punctuated, and followed the 1962 border war between the two countries.

Phase of Detente and Deterrence

It is, at the same time, arguable that the ongoing phase in Sino-Indian relations is one of detente and deterrence. The present phase has been made possible by a series of sequential developments: (1) a diplomatic breakthrough in India’s relations with nuclear-armed China in the waning years of the Cold War, (2) a series of follow-up bilateral confidence-building measures, (3) India’s nuclear arms tests of 1998, (4) the definitive rise of China as a space-faring economic powerhouse with potential for a global political profile, and (5) a more-or-less parallel but very-much-slower rise of India, too, as a space-age economic power with potential for a global political role. The driving logic of these sequential and parallel developments and their impact on China-India relationship fall outside the purview of the limited focus of this paper: the cordiality of their latest defence talks at a time of military tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad.

The latest China-India Annual Defence Dialogue, held in Beijing on 14 January 2013, was co-chaired by Qi Jianguo, Deputy Chief of General Staff of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, and Mr Sharma, India’s Defence Secretary. The two sides agreed to strengthen military ties⁶ in such primary areas as bilateral exchanges and joint exercises⁷. General Qi Jianguo emphasised that “the development of relations between the Chinese and Indian militaries is an important symbol of in-depth cooperation between the two countries”. As a preface, the Chinese military leader said: “China-India relations are one of China’s most important foreign relations. China sincerely hopes to establish a strategic partnership⁸ [with India]”.

The possibility of a big picture should not be missed for the dense details of important but hackneyed words that were deployed in the diplomatic interaction between these defence officials and between Mr Sharma and General Xu Qiliang in Beijing in mid-January 2013. Moreover, the possibility of a big picture is discernible in the significant but commonplace words deployed in Mr Xi’s earlier letter to Dr Singh and in Mr Dai’s message to Dr Singh on 10 January 2013.

⁶ China’s Ministry of National Defence, *Xinhua* (14 January 2013), http://eng.mod.gov.cn/MilitaryExchanges/2013-01/15/content_4427661.htm. Accessed on 16 January 2013.

⁷ India and China hold Third Annual Defence Dialogue, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Defence (14 January 2013), <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx>. Accessed on 16 January 2013.

⁸ China’s Ministry of National Defence, China Military Online, (15 January 2013), http://eng.mod.gov.cn/MilitaryExchanges/2013-01/15/content_4427869.htm. Accessed on 16 January 2013.

Taken together, the big picture of possibilities in Sino-Indian ties, going forward, can be portrayed as follows: The incoming Chinese leaders have expressed their preference for “developing relations with India” in a “stable” fashion. Such intent has gained credence because of the latest Sino-Indian defence talks at the time of heightened military tensions between China’s close friend, Pakistan, and India. In the period ahead, these new signs of a Sino-Indian search for stability in bilateral ties will come under the scanner.

.....