

An Unusual Sino-Indian Summit and After

P S Suryanarayana¹

Abstract

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's recent state visit to India, 19-22 May 2013, was neither a classical charm offensive in diplomacy nor a post-modern crisis-busting political journey. What he did achieve was to place the political and economic "concerns" of space-faring China and India at the centre-stage of their discussions. This has raised the possibility of a 'new model' of Sino-Indian dialogue, driven by a sense of optimism after their recent military standoff eased. At another level, though, there is still a lot of circumspection, if not also scepticism. India, for its part, must begin addressing its asymmetric equation with China across the entire spectrum.

Introduction: First Choice

China's new Premier Li Keqiang exuded a lot of charm towards his hosts in the country he chose, with much care, for starting his first overseas tour in his exalted position. The Indian leaders and people, too, did not cold-shoulder him at all. However, while receiving him warmly and hosting him graciously from 19 May 2013 to 22 May, they did not also conceal their circumspection, if not scepticism. For his part, Mr Li, too, did not raise false visions of *Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai* Mark-II, the original slogan of this genre in the 1950s (hailing the fraternal India-China ties) having faded. The reasons for this new state of play in Sino-Indian relations today are not far to seek.

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

Mr Li's visit was preceded by a military standoff, which took few weeks to defuse, at a stretch of territory along the undefined Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the general area of the disputed Sino-Indian boundary. At the same time, the Chinese leader did not have to exert efforts to break that crisis, which had come under control by the time he made a choreographed touchdown of friendship at New Delhi airport on 19 May.

In the final analysis, the Chinese leader succeeded, going forward, in placing the “*concerns*” of both India and China at the centre-stage of their diplomatic engagement. This does not, however, mean that the major “concerns” on either side have already eased. More precisely, Mr Li has now resorted to a policy elucidation of the earlier public exhortation by the new Chinese helmsman Xi Jinping that India and China “*should accommodate each other's core concerns*”.²

Nuanced Accent on ‘Concerns’

A relevant nuance is noteworthy in this context. Mr Xi had, in a media interaction in Beijing on 19 March, propounded that China and India should actually yield space to each other's “*core concerns*”. In contrast, Mr Li told India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, during in-camera discussions in New Delhi on 19 and 20 May, that the two countries would “need” to “take into account each other's concerns”³ going forward. It is easy to detect that Mr Li has dropped the adjective, “core”, from Mr Xi's idea of Sino-Indian “core concerns”. However, this does not detract from the fact that Mr Li has now voiced, in policy terms, China's willingness to address India's “concerns” on a reciprocal basis. Mr Xi had earlier outlined his preference during the course of public diplomacy of talking to journalists – not in policy-related discussions with the Indian leaders.

In a different but related diplomatic theme, it is not enough if India and China address each other's concerns or core concerns. Prospects of peace and tranquillity in the relations between the two Asian mega-state neighbours are likely to look up, only if their *core interests, not just concerns*, are addressed. Core interests are fundamental to the well-being of any state which will have concerns over specific issues at any given time.

Viewed in this perspective, the Joint Statement issued after the Li-Singh talks on 20 May is devoid of substantive signs of new progress in addressing the core interests of either China or India.

New Delhi's *core interests*, in its diplomatic engagement with China, span these varied aspects: (1) political detente as a requisite step towards peaceful coexistence with China on a durable basis, (2) India's compulsion to build its capabilities in nuclear and other domains of military deterrence to checkmate the perceived Chinese “designs”, (3) the status of entire Jammu & Kashmir as an integral part of the Indian Union, (4) an end to, or at least a

² Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t1023070.shtml>

³ Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/lkqipsg/t1043443.shtml>

substantive mitigation of, the suspected anti-India focus in the incremental Sino-Pakistani “all-weather partnership” and “all-weather friendship”, (5) a level-playing field in New Delhi’s economic engagement with Beijing (inclusive of India’s “rights” as a lower-riparian state in regard to the *Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo)*), (6) the need for Beijing’s explicit support of India’s aspiration to become a veto-empowered permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, much like China itself, and (7) the requirement of Beijing’s support for India’s bid to become a member of elite multilateral groups and forums on issues like nuclear-non-proliferation.

A sample of Beijing’s *core interests*, in regard to New Delhi, are: (1) China’s compulsion to establish stable or manageable bilateral relations so that India would have no reason to try and tilt towards the United States or become a pro-America swing-state in Asia’s power politics, (2) Steps, if the Chinese could take, to wean India to their side in Sino-US competition; (3) the preservation of Beijing’s sovereignty over Tibet as an intrinsic part of the People’s Republic of China, and (4) the non-negotiable policy of translating the One-China dream into a living reality.

As for the immediate concerns of India and China in their bilateral engagement, distinct from their core interests, some specific areas of mutual concern have been addressed in the Joint Statement.

A Defused Standoff and After

First, the Joint Statement contains no whiff of direct reference to the recent military standoff that lasted several weeks from 15 April – emphatically, with no exchange of fire at all. In an indirect reference to the defusing of that standoff, “the two sides [now] noted with satisfaction that the meetings of the China-India Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on Border Affairs held till date have been fruitful”.⁴ Apart from this Mechanism, which was set up following a Sino-Indian summit in January 2012, India and China used several other diplomatic and military channels to defuse this particular military standoff. There is a storyline as evident from the manner in which the standoff was reversed: Neither country seems inclined to cross the invisible red lines of military escalation as of now. A relevant cautionary note is that such a conclusion is still very much a tentative one.

However, a passage in the Joint Statement reinforces this conclusion: “Pending the resolution of the boundary question, the two sides shall work together to maintain peace and tranquillity in the border areas in line with the previous [confidence-building] agreements”.⁵ Moreover, Dr Singh and Mr Li “encouraged” the Special Representatives of the two countries to “push

⁴ Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/lkqipsg/t1042798.shtml>

⁵ Ibid

forward the process of negotiations”⁶ to resolve the basic but complex boundary dispute itself.

Second, the Joint Statement is silent on the Chinese proposal for a Border Defence Cooperation Agreement. Annotating this omission, India’s Ambassador to China, S Jaishankar, said, in a media briefing after the Singh-Li talks, as follows: “The Chinese gave us their draft on the 4th of March. I think we gave them our draft on the 10th May. Obviously now we will be discussing it with the Chinese. Since our draft is pending their consideration, to me it is not at all surprising the matter did not come up [at the Singh-Li talks] because it is still something on which we need to engage them in detailed discussion”.⁷

As for another trans-border issue, i.e., India’s “rights” as a lower-riparian state in regard to the waters of the *Brahmaputra* (known as *Yarlung Tsangpo* on the Chinese side), the Joint Statement is silent on India’s plea for a new mechanism. Mr Li, in his talks with Dr Singh, emphasised the “need” to “make full use of the existing mechanisms to beef up cooperation on issues concerning cross-border rivers”.⁸

Echoing Mr Li’s version, Dr Jaishankar noted as follows: “I would really characterise the Chinese response as sympathetic. I think they recognise that we have concerns. They pointed out that they were [a] responsible [state], that they would not do something which would damage our interests. And essentially what we agreed upon was that we would strengthen our cooperation based on our existing mechanism and now we have to work further on that”.⁹

Civil Nuclear Exchanges

Third, a truly significant – and relatively new – dimension of India-China engagement is spelt out in the Joint Statement as follows: “The two sides will carry out bilateral cooperation in civil nuclear energy in line with their respective international commitments”.¹⁰ Amplifying this ‘surprise’ in the new Sino-Indian package, Dr Jaishankar interpreted as follows: “We have had bilateral civil nuclear cooperation with China in the past, not in the recent past but in the past. Today the issue came up again. And you must bear in mind that we are today probably the two countries who have the largest planned civil nuclear energy programme. So, it makes great sense for us to exchange views and have other exchanges”.¹¹

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India: <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/21724/Transcript+of+Media+Briefing...>

⁸ Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/lkqipsg/t1043443.shtml>

⁹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India: <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/21724/Transcript+of+Media+Briefing...>

¹⁰ Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/lkqipsg/t1042798.shtml>

¹¹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India: <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/21724/Transcript+of+Media+Briefing...>

Fourth, economic issues, including two-way investments and India's huge trade imbalance with China, were discussed at great length. It is specified in the Joint Statement that "the two countries agreed to take measures to address the issue of the trade imbalance".¹²

Of equal or greater significance on the economic side of the Sino-Indian ledger is the emphasis on the prospect of "initiating the development of a BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) Economic Corridor".¹³ On this project, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has noted that "the consensus of constructing BCIM Economic Corridor jointly proposed by China and India receives much attention from all walks of life". In a briefing on the outcome of Mr Li's visit to India, Mr Wang said: "The propelling of this idea combines China's opening up to the west [inside China itself] with India's 'Look East Policy'. The linking of the world's two important growth poles of East Asia and South Asia will surely release enormous growth energy and provide new vitality for the Asian economic integration and global growth".¹⁴

In Beijing's geo-economic perspective, there is another project which can link China's underdeveloped western region with another country, Pakistan, and its economic priorities. Mr Li, who travelled to Pakistan from India, spoke about this after his talks with the Pakistani leaders in Islamabad on 23 May. He said: "The two sides agreed to combine the expanding of domestic demand in China and the strategy of developing China's western region with the process of domestic economic development in Pakistan..... Both sides decided to ... build up a China-Pakistan Economic Corridor".¹⁵ Such a corridor is generally expected to link China to Pakistan's southern port of Gwadar, which recently passed into Beijing's hands. He also expressed China's willingness to help Pakistan upgrade the strategically crucial Karakoram Highway, an issue that bristles with overtones of concern in official Indian circles.

Geo-economic 'Encirclement' of India

Some official and non-official observers will possibly see China's parallel advocacy of the BCIM Economic Corridor and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as a potential ploy to encircle India in geo-economic and strategic terms. Such a view will be an extension of the current theory in some Indian circles that China has more or less completed a geo-political encirclement of India by gaining access to various ports in the South-Southeast Asian region.

Regardless of whether or not this kind of argument is reflective of mainstream opinion in India at this time, some recent commentaries in China's *People's Daily* have raised the possibility of a "new model of China-India relations". Mu Yongpeng, a special commentator of the paper, which belongs to the stable of China's state-party system, has written that the

¹² Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/lkqipsg/t1042798.shtml>

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/lkqipsg/t1044286.shtml>

¹⁵ Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/lqipsg/t1044071.shtml>

new model “is a continuation and development of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and a useful attempt to establish new relations among major powers of the 21st century”.¹⁶ A key factor in such a formulation is the perception that India is now seeking resolution of the boundary dispute with China on “the basis of reality” and that New Delhi wants to avoid a zero-sum game with Beijing.

Whether or not such a new model could be built at the present moment, India will have no cause to suspect or fear ‘encirclement’ by China in only one scenario. It is entirely up to India to address the huge asymmetric equation with China across the board. China’s growing external reach has been made possible by progressive improvements in most indices of the country’s comprehensive national strength – the economy and the military, to mention just two domains. Regardless of whether New Delhi can or should follow Beijing’s political as also economic and social values, it stands to reason that India must put its house in order and begin to rebalance with China so as to attain an adequate degree of equivalence. This and related aspects call for sophisticated debate and serious follow-up action in India with regard to its focus on China.

.....

¹⁶ *People’s Daily* of PRC: <http://english.people.com.cn/90883/8239808.html>