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Signs of India under Global Re-Focus

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Abstract

A flurry of quick new glances at India from different sections of the international community reflects a surge of interest in a country freshly under Narendra Modi's leadership of anticipatory assertiveness. The re-emerging importance of India is evident from at least four new developments – the Chinese President's Special Envoy Wang Yi's talks with Mr Modi in New Delhi on 9 June 2014; the fleeting but firm focus on India at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in late-May and early-June; the unusual presence of several South Asian leaders at Mr Modi's prime ministerial inauguration on 26 May; and earlier US President Barack Obama's invitation to the new Indian leader to visit Washington. It is now up to India to make the best of this renewed global attention by focusing on the country's economy and diplomacy. And the current signals from New Delhi do indicate that such priorities have been recognised. Moving forward, strategic stability in India and its neighbourhood is possible

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only through China-India-Pakistan cooperation (not just dialogue) at one level, and China-India-US-Japan cooperation at another echelon.

From Image to Imaginative Move

The talks between Chinese President Xi Jinping's Special Envoy, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and India's newly-elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi on 9 June 2014 signalled a message transcending the dynamics of Sino-Indian ties. This message is quite simple but significant. Major global powers have been quick to discern that the latest formation of a stable government under Mr Modi's leadership of anticipatory assertiveness has raised the prospect of India's re-emergence as a key player in world affairs in political and economic domains. Surely, such re-emergence is still a matter of potential rather than reality. All the same, there was a fleeting but firm glimpse of India's rising importance – at the 13th Asia Security Summit (also known as Shangri-La Dialogue, so named after the hotel-venue of that annual conference in Singapore). The summit was held in Singapore under the auspices of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) from 30 May to 1 June 2014.

It was on 16 May that Mr Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gained an absolute majority in the *Lok Sabha*, the powerful Lower House of India's Parliament, unseating a deeply-troubled Congress-led coalition. Even as such a far-reaching outcome of India's latest national election was announced, United States President Barack Obama telephoned the emerging Indian leader to congratulate him and invite him to the US for summit-level talks. This marked a delicate diplomatic recognition of Mr Modi, who was earlier considered 'ineligible' for a US visa because of his alleged ill-will towards India's Muslim-minority during his long reign as Chief Minister of the Indian state, or province, of Gujarat.

However, Mr Obama's 'gesture' of goodwill towards Mr Modi was completely eclipsed by two other developments. Mr Modi surprised his friends and critics alike by taking the imaginative step of inviting the leaders of India's neighbouring-countries in South Asia to witness his formal assumption of office as Prime Minister. For a variety of reasons, including that of reading Mr Modi's mind, these South Asian leaders, including Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, responded positively and held talks with Mr Modi soon after he took office on 26 May. It would not have been lost on Mr Obama that Mr Modi was being seen by

India's neighbours as an Indian 'Nixon' (with diplomatic realism and without a Watergate-like baggage).

It is understood that the Modi-Sharif talks were not only cordial but also candid indeed. Mr Sharif later emphasised in a statement that the two countries "have a common agenda of development and economic revival, which is not possible to achieve without peace and stability in the [South Asian] region". Noting that his government "stands ready to discuss all issues [between India and Pakistan] in a spirit of cooperation and sincerity", Mr Sharif said Mr Modi "warmly reciprocated"² such sentiments. Mr Modi, according to Mr Sharif, remarked that the people of India saw the Pakistani leader's visit as "a special gesture".

No less important is that Mr Sharif braved the mixed reaction in Pakistan to his enthusiastic visit to New Delhi and his talks with Mr Modi. In this context, Mr Sharif is reported to have written to Mr Modi expressing a desire to work in harmony with India to resolve unsettled bilateral issues. The Pakistani leader also emphasised the common economic destiny of India and Pakistan. Even as this narrative was gaining currency in international circles, and as at the time this is written, some sections in Pakistan began saying that the terrorists who stormed the Karachi airport in June had used "Indian weapons". Questions to this effect were even raised at the Foreign Ministry briefing in Islamabad on 12 June.³ This was a measure of the mixed reaction in Pakistan to the Sharif-Modi meeting in New Delhi on 26 and 27 May. Interestingly, however, a former Chief of Pakistan Army had told this author, on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on 31 May that the Sharif-Modi talks in New Delhi a few days earlier was seen in positive light in a number of circles in Pakistan itself.

China's Overture to Modi

Mr Modi was in for more surprise, surely of pleasantness, when China effusively responded to his emergence as India's indisputable new leader. The historical context of China's attitude towards Mr Modi is illuminating. Sixty years ago, China had found a kindred soul in India in enunciating the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (*Panchsheel* in the Indian parlance) as the template of civilised guidelines for inter-state relations. The quintessential characteristic of the Five Principles, both as their overarching norm and as their subsumed

² Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif's Statement to the Media at New Delhi, May 27, 2014, www.pmo.gov.pk/news_details.php?news_id=200 (accessed on 28 May 2014)

³ Questions raised at Press Briefing by the Spokesperson of Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014-06-12, www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?prID=2035 (accessed on 12 June 2014)

ingredient, is the dictum that nation-states must respect one another's domestic political and social systems. Due to this dictum, China has held no negative view of Mr Modi, who was accused of practising *Hindutva* politics as long as he was Chief Minister of Gujarat (until he gave up that post to become India's Prime Minister). Not to be confused with the hoary philosophy of Hinduism, *Hindutva* politics is viewed by its critics as the assertion of the 'supremacy' of India's Hindu-majority and the parallel 'relegation' of Muslim-minority in the country's internal affairs.

Given that China had played host to Mr Modi when he was still the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Beijing has had no US-like embarrassment of having to make a U-turn in quickly recognising Mr Modi's emergence now as India's indisputable leader. Not only that. China has also been enormously quick in treating Mr Modi as a leader who might herald the prospect of a proactive India on the global stage. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang was the first world leader to telephone Mr Modi to congratulate him soon after he assumed office on 26 May.

Not to be outdone in 'strategic' thinking of the diplomatic variety, Mr Modi capitalised on Mr Li's telephone call and extended an invitation to Chinese President Xi to visit India. It requires no clairvoyance to discern Mr Modi's calculation. He surely signalled, through that move, that he would like to enter into a substantive dialogue with none other than China's highest leader, President Xi, who is increasingly seen as that country's potential or real paramount leader. It is in this overall context that Mr Modi's talks with Mr Xi's Special Envoy, Mr Wang, in New Delhi on 9 June acquire unusual importance.

Mr Wang and India's new External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj first held extensive delegation-level talks on 8 June. India's official spokesman later characterised these talks as "cordial, useful, productive, and substantive".⁴ Specific outcomes were neither anticipated nor announced, given the nature and scope of Mr Wang's visit. CCTV, China's authoritative Central Television, quoted Mr Wang, after his talks with Mr Modi, as saying that "it is [now] a new beginning for China-India relations". Mr Wang also emphasised that "China supports India's development".⁵ Regardless of how far China can be a positive factor in India's growth story, going forward, it is common sense that India first needs to focus on its economy and not just diplomacy. There are indications that Mr Modi is aware of this.

⁴ Transcript of Media Briefing by Official Spokesperson (June 8, 2014), www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/23409/Transcript+of+Media+Briefing+... (accessed on 9 June 2014)

⁵ As monitored in Singapore on 9 June 2014

‘A New Historical Starting Point’

As for Mr Wang’s explicit perception of “a new historical starting point” in Sino-Indian engagement now, Chinese President Xi’s message to Mr Modi, as conveyed to him by Mr Wang at this time, is as much nuanced in content as it is effusive in tone. The operative part of Mr Xi’s message to Mr Modi has been spelt out as follows: “As two important forces in the process of multi-polarisation, China and India share far more common interests than differences. The two countries are long-term cooperative partners rather than competing adversaries. The dreams of both China and India to increase national strength and people’s wealth are in accord with each other”.⁶ Outwardly, the only relatively-new punch-lines in Mr Xi’s message are his acknowledgment of India’s “dream ... to increase [its] national strength”, besides China’s renewed emphasis on the goal of “multi-polarisation” in global affairs.

Surely, “multi-polarisation”, or the multiplicity of power-centres across the world, is not in disharmony with China’s continuing quest for a “new model of major-country relations” with the US, a thinly-veiled goal of a virtual Sino-US Group of Two (G2). However, Mr Xi’s emphasis on “multi-polarisation” in his current message to Mr Modi does signal the possibility of China having to accept, or more likely adjust to, India’s own quest for raising its “national strength”. Obvious from Mr Xi’s message is that the international community is beginning to expect Mr Modi to make a determined effort to be assertive in his ‘nationalist’ efforts to raise India’s strength and profile in global affairs. In contrast to such external perceptions of Mr Modi, Indians will, by and large, want to see how he addresses India’s Himalayan challenges of improving its national strengths, in economic and security terms, and thereby increasing the country’s diplomatic space.

On a different but related front, Mr Modi’s invitation to Mr Xi, extended on the eve of the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2014 in Singapore, was handsomely noted during a special televised debate that preceded the keynote address at that event on 30 May. The televised debate was organised by a prominent Chinese channel.

⁶ Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India Meets with Wang Yi’, 2014/06/10, www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1164481.shtml (accessed on 11 June 2014)

Under Cameo-Lens at Shangri-La Dialogue

The key highlight of the general narrative on the Shangri-La Dialogue 2014 is that a top Chinese military leader went on a delayed but strong counter-offensive against the US and Japan, both of which had openly or implicitly “condemned China”. Lieutenant General Wang Guanzhong, Deputy Chief, General Staff Department, People’s Liberation Army, spoke on behalf of China on the third day of the summit; while Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe delivered the keynote address to thunderous applause on the first day; and, on the second day, US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel held forth on his country’s “contribution to regional stability” in the Asia-Pacific theatre. However, the fleeting attention that India received at this summit, not only from the Japanese and American leaders but also from China, served as some sort of a multi-layered and complex preview of the Chinese overture to India, which was played out in New Delhi on 8 and 9 June.

In sync with the US-led thinking on the possibility of a realignment of forces on the global stage, Mr Abe and Mr Hagel were forthright in courting India, now led by Mr Modi, in their comments at Shangri-La Dialogue 2014. Speaking in the context of Tokyo’s “trilateral cooperation with like-minded partners to promote peace and economic prosperity in Asia and the Pacific and around the globe”, Mr Abe first identified the US and Australia as Japan’s prime interlocutors. In the same breath, Mr Abe said: “In India, Mr Narendra Modi has become prime minister through another free and fair election. I am absolutely certain that when I welcome Prime Minister Modi to Tokyo, we will successfully confirm that the Japan-India cooperation, as well as trilateral cooperation including our two countries [and the US], will make the ‘confluence of the two seas’ that is the Pacific and Indian oceans, peaceful and more prosperous”.⁷

Mr Abe was equally effusive about his strategic overture to India. Responding to a question from a BJP Member of Parliament, Tarun Vijay, Mr Abe said: “As for Asia and India and the Pacific Ocean, I consider the peace and prosperity of these regions to be extremely important for global development. From that perspective, Japan and India are in the process of developing a strategic global partnership. ... Defence exchanges between Japan and India are

⁷ IISS, Keynote Address: Shinzo Abe, <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20la%20dialogue/archive/2014-c20c/opening-re...> (accessed on 5 June 2014)

already progressing. The Indian Navy and Japan's Self-Defence Forces are conducting joint naval drills. And Japan, India, and the US are also conducting joint drills".⁸

No less important was Mr Abe's "looking forward to that day"⁹ when Mr Modi would visit Tokyo to "further develop" India-Japan relations. Later, responding to a question from this author, a delegate to Shangri-La Dialogue 2014, whether Mr Abe's eloquence about the trilateral Japan-India-US cooperation would extend to "combat capabilities" in military terms, Japanese Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera said: "India in particular is the superpower in South Asia. We believe it is important that we [Japan and India] continue to further enrich the relationship between the two countries going forward. However, when Japan has a relationship with other countries, that means it is basically a cooperative and peaceful relationship. Under the new administration [in India], we [in Japan] would like to see a tight bond formed with India going forward".¹⁰

America, which in a sense had led the way in seeking strong strategic ties with India for several years and set an example for countries like Japan, was equally firm in wooing India now. Seeking to "expand" the US-India Defence Trade and Technology Initiative, already a "centerpiece" in the ties between the two countries, Mr Hagel said he hoped to visit India later this year to "drive even more transformational cooperation" in this domain.

While there is nothing particularly unusual about either the US or Japan and indeed both wanting closer strategic ties with India, except for the effusiveness in the context of Mr Modi's ascendance as Prime Minister, an unusual question was raised by a Chinese delegate. Wenguang Shao wanted to know from Lt Gen Wang of the Chinese PLA whether China would respond to American moves by "building up its [own] defence alliance, for instance with Russia, India, and other like-minded countries".¹¹ While the Russia-India-China trilateral forum may, on paper, appear to have the potential of becoming a balancer against the US, it is truly a matter of out-of-the-boxing thinking to see India in the same league as post-Soviet Russia and as a like-minded country with which China could have a "defence alliance". This poser was not addressed by Lt Gen Wang, although he had earlier noted that

⁸ Ibid (IISS, Keynote Address: Q&A)

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ IISS, Advancing Military-to-Military Cooperation: Q&A, <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20la%20dialogue/archive/2014-c20c/plenary-2-...> (accessed on 5 June 2014)

¹¹ IISS, Major Power Perspectives on Peace and Security in the Asia-Pacific: Q&A, <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20la%20dialogue/archive/2014-c20c/plenary-4-...> (accessed on 5 June 2014)

China “continue[s] to ... enhance friendly military security cooperation with India”,¹² among others. In fact, responding to a question from this author in a special session of Shangri-La Dialogue 2014, Major General Yao Yunzhu of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army said that China-India mil-to-mil relationship was of “robust” proportions now. On balance, though, the visit to India now by the Chinese President’s Special Envoy Wang Yi is of strategic importance of the diplomatic variety, transcending any detail of defence cooperation. Indeed, it was evident from the discourse at this Shangri-La Dialogue that China and its friends, as well as the US as also its friends and allies, will be relevant to strategic stability in the Asia-Pacific region. India, despite its current low profile, figures prominently in this matrix, going forward.

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¹² Ibid (Major Power Perspectives on Peace and Security in the Asia-Pacific: Lieutenant General Wang Guanzhong)