

Xi's Visit: Dawn of a New Era?

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Summary

Modi should talk to Xi and seek an interim boundary solution at least by having some sort of Friendly Pillars, call them Shanti Stupas along the border (almost 500 kilometers) in the Western Sector.

India's foreign policy overhauling is glaring and Modi, so far, has made the right strategic and tactical moves that seem paying off. He is proving that India matters and can play around with Asian nations. Starting with Bhutan, he not only went on to resurrect India's bonds with Asia but also seeking to raise India's geopolitical profile. Modi proved his diplomatic astuteness in Tokyo for he not only flagged his development plans, but also showed the strategic resolve.

How Modi deals with China during Xi Jinping's visit from September 17 will test his strategic acumen. Clearly, both Xi and Modi are making special efforts to reach out to each other. The key question is whether Modi can prod the potential challenger to become a potential partner of India.

Modi is aware that the bond with China is even deeper and the geography offers unparalleled advantages. Modi is mindful about China's hefts that outstripped those of India many folds and he also knows Beijing has carefully positioned itself in Asia. Any revival would be more rewarding, but a complex relationship he inherits, it will not be simple. Therefore, Prime Minister might cast his eye upon China with craftiness if not with an amount of cunningness for he knows it would be worthwhile to shed some of our self-inflated egos if it helps to strengthen India's national interests. The key strategy therefore is no antagonism, no containment, not even competition but to catch up with China even if it means to copy from Chinese propensities and strengths. Modi may already have found simple solutions for complex problems.

Strategic Move

At the very start, Modi played few brilliant strokes. In his first geostrategic move, he made important posturing by seeking a "*special strategic and global partnership*" with Japan ostensibly to contend China. The "*expansionist mindset*" expression intended to remind the Chinese of their image in Asia. Some airings on issues impinging on China like on Tibet, Arunachal Pradesh, PoK, 'One-China policy' etc may have had their impact. His earlier visit to the Himalayan states also seemed calibrated. Pakistan fell neither in Modi's economic horizon nor on his strategic radar. Calling off a scheduled talk also seemed calculated in his wider Asia strategy.

The Chinese understand strategic gamble well. In the past, China was troubled by the Indo-Soviet nexus, and later it feared a possible India-US-Japan axis. China took India seriously in its strategic calculation only after the Pokhran test (1998). Indian diplomats noted that Beijing showed keen interests after New Delhi moved closer to Washington (2005). Premier Wen Jiabao came in 2005 to sign "*strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity*" and agreed to set Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the boundary settlement. To be sure, this time around, Modi's strategic checkmating holds greater validity. China cannot risk others ganging up. Chinese expert Wang Jisi of the Center for International and Strategic warned about running into such risks especially

when China's ties with Japan and others in Southeast Asia are deteriorating. Beijing, therefore, cannot afford to ignore India under Modi.

Economic Imperatives

Modi's strategy seems to be working. Beijing may try to assuage the impact of India's growing ties with Japan. The balancing act is good because despite friend Shinzo Abe promises, Japan Inc, though they love the idea of India, will be loath to do business in India, as they know the pitfalls. Overall, the strategy will help Modi attract investments he needs to implement his transformation plans.

However, what attracts the attention of China most is Modi's massive personal mandate. Most Chinese remained cagey about Modi's predecessor who remained cordial to Beijing throughout but hobnobbed closely with Washington. This time, Beijing probably wants to nip in the bud – a reason why President Xi sent his Foreign Minister Wang Yi to New Delhi within weeks of Modi assuming office.

Through his Japan trip, Modi also signalled Beijing on his transformation plans and open-door policies. The Chinese investors well versed with Modi's reformist traits, his economic model and urge for laying infrastructure to propel growth – all akin to China's model – are surely tempted. President Xi is coming with big-ticket investment plans possibly \$100 billion to help rapidly upgrade Indian industry, infrastructure and railways. This is what Modi wants for he also knows that cooperation with China in areas of clear mutual interest is necessary. If Japan offers better industrial technology, China offers immense market for Indian companies that should cut India's enormous trade deficit with China now touching about \$35 billion.

Regional Context

No one can overlook the important regional context of India-China relations. China sees its long-time friend Pakistan is in deep mess and its misdeeds might even engulf China in a vortex of terrorism. In comparison, Beijing sees a goldmine of opportunity in India, economically and strategically. One should remember, the Chinese seriously believe in seizing the opportunity. It is here that Xi Jinping's skirting Islamabad visit citing "ongoing unrest" cannot be that simplistic. It seems more a nuanced Chinese decision. China has downplayed Xi's trip cancellation where he was to doll out \$34 billion investment plan, but Chinese experts closed to the Party believed the visit call off may in fact "improve" the effect of Xi's visit. In any case, breaking from the past tradition and skirting Pakistan from the visit provides an interesting contrast, pregnant with meanings for India.

On a more serious note, Beijing planners seem unable to overlook the post-Afghan scenario and the new threat of expanding the Islamic Caliphate up to China. **Xinjiang is already a hotbed of terrorism.** A full-blown Jihadi suicide-bombings culture has penetrated from

across the Af-Pak region now. Like from India, Chinese citizens are fighting alongside ISIS in Iraq. Their returning with possible chemical and biological weapon knowhow could create havoc in China and India. The irony for China is that Premier Li Keqiang vowed to build an economic corridor the 'One Belt and One Road', described by Pakistanis as "a monument of the century" to spur economic boom in Xinjiang is turning out to be a corridor for opening the floodgate of Jihadis into China. Islamabad promises to control the flow, but ironically Islamabad is unable to sway hold over a quarter of its own territory - now under the Taliban control.

Beijing also knows the people in India long detested China's strategic intent in South Asia. Beijing might just be trying to dispel that as well. Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying on September 12, denied China having any containment policy against India by military or other means - no strategic competition and no such word as 'surround'. One hope these are not deceptions because the Chinese are masters of the art of denial and deception.

Boundary Issue

However, any success or failure to exploit the strategic and economic opportunities hinges on their ability find a simple explanation if not a quick solution for the old boundary dispute, for it continues to create mistrust. So far, both adequately played a protracted nonzero-sum game directly and by proxies in which neither has won nor lost. Clearly, the 1962 conflict dented India's image but it also tinted China as an impulsive and expansionist nation.

The rules of the international situation changed dramatically since 1962. The geopolitical complexities in which boundary intrigues evolved i.e., from personality clashes, mutual dislikes, ideological antagonism and external impetus et al no longer exist. The two countries have come a long way, even aspiring to lead the world. Cooperation is essential not for any ideological reasons but as an unavoidable global imperative.

Both China and India need to realize that notion of a boundary never existed between two civilizations devoid of any conflict over four thousand years of history and if any, they were customary at best, which united rather than divided the two. There had been local-level "non-aggressions" pacts but not amounting to delimitation and demarcation of lines.

The British strategists had to focus more on the North-West frontiers because it was from where maximum threat to India emanated and continue to do so. Their priority was for stabilizing the Afghans and containing the main rival Russia and hence fixed the Durand Line in 1893. But frontiers beyond Ladakh were 'terra incognita', desolate, barren, less productive, inhuman, costly to retain, and above all less threatening to India's security. Recognizing constrains, the British preferred a flexible boundary so that the nomads could

transgress. For Lord Hardinge even the Gulab Singh's 1842 agreement with Tibet seemed irrelevant.

To be sure, the British frontier strategists created ambiguity. In their boundary-making exercises (1846 – 1890) they oscillated between a maximalist forward approach pursued by WH Johnson (1865), John Ardghah (1897), and a moderate policy adopted by Mc Cartney (1986), Viceroy Elgin (1898) and Calude Mac Donald (1899). In this, the threat of Russian advance dictated British policies. The forward school pushed up boundary north of Karakoram and ostensibly tried to seek buffer against Russia in Sinkiang. The moderates preferred China holding Aksai Chin rather than leaving a "No-Man's Land", for they also needed to induce China as a bulwark against Russian advance. In fact, Younghusband (1890) helped China occupy pockets in the Pamirs to prevent Russian trespassing. Even the Karakoram Range became a mutually accepted fixed China-India boundary (1892) because of the Russian factor.

Unfortunately, the idea of moderate school for sharing the Aksai Chin plateau along an East-West line between Britain and China (proposed to China in 1899) did not materialize. The British adhered to the proposal but China never ratified it. India in 1947, therefore, landed up inheriting the most "forward" position, which Nehru and his politico-military elite (leftovers of the Raj) seriously followed to fall into a strategic blunder and a trap. The partial and unofficial release of Henderson Brooks report reveals rest of that tragic episode.

A generation of Indians has tried to live down the tragedy, but the humiliation of 1962 defeat still lingers in the national psyche as paranoia. In fact, a shift in thinking was long overdue. The pragmatists though favoured 'let go of the forever foe' approach, for they have realized that the real problem may have little do with China but largely to our own self-caused actions or inactions. However, so far, the critics have proved reasons for going against that way. Moreover, Indian political class so far feared a change in status quo for it would unleash a torrent of criticism and loss of their power. Of course, China's relentless aggressive intrusions actions and dishonouring of the spirit of peace and tranquility border agreements signed over the years have largely perpetuated jingoistic thinking in India.

Ground Situation

As of today, there is no cessation of transgressions along the border despite the Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) signed last year. The daily face-offs along the Line of Control (LoC) in Ladakh are a serious concern. Perception differences are most in the eight out of ten sub-sectors in Ladakh where Chinese incursions are highest. Serious once take place in Burtse, Tri-junction, Sirjab, Charding-Nilung Nalla (CNN) and in lesser frequency in Dumtsele.

China's incremental advances and shifting the Line of Actual Control (LAC) forward may have other dimensions than consolidating its boundary limits. To be fair, China has

not proved reckless and unpredictable unlike Pakistan that vows to bleed India through terrorist acts. No harshness, no export of ideology, no interference is seen from China's side. However, for India the asymmetric disadvantages are only increasing because of China's smart development plans on its side that works as psychological warfare.

For now, neither side intends to pick a fight, but daily face-offs do ratchet up tensions and arouse sentiments among people. A loud thinking about finding a quick solution is unrealistic. There are no visible signs from the Chinese yet for a breakthrough. Chinese officials ahead of Xi's visit expressed "confidence and capability" to resolve the border dispute while also committing peace along border.

However, a possibility is perhaps arising in both the countries to build a public opinion for a final resolution. Obviously, the differences are not so much about substantive issues but lingering ego-hurt feeling, as well as inability on both sides to handle their respective public opinion. The main problem now arises from failure to agree on *modus operandi*. China's belligerences along the borders do not give the desired traction for coming to a negotiating settlement along the 2005 Guiding Principles.

In India, public opinion may have improved relatively as compared to previous generation unable to reel from the impact of 1962. For sure, having had taken a firm position, it is equally hard for the Chinese to abandon their claims on Arunachal Pradesh, for they know prospects for physically reoccupying is bleak, and if they do, the costs will be heavy. The Indians too probably see no prospect whatsoever to retrieve Aksai Chin. The way out is to pass off the 1962 episode as mere accidental and find an honourable solution on the *status quo ante* basis. Building a national is possible by starting from Ladakh, where the people have come to terms with loss of their land to China.

It is no coincidence that the two popular leaders Modi and Xi enjoy unprecedented political legitimacy to express the aspirations of majority in India and China. In India, Modi's rise symbolizes not so much as a political platform as it is the expression of a national idea. People seems elated over the rise of an ideal leader hoping he would not only rectify past follies and restore India's lost credibility but also bring the country out from the vortex of timidity trap with China.

If Modi takes a bold step, the majority Indians will rally around him. To be sure, forces including external one will try to wreck such an idea. But Modi should prove himself not as the consolidator of the former borders of the British Empire, but a consolidator of the territories that are inherently part of India.

Irrespective of progress on the boundary settlement, challenges for India on China front will remain numerous and complex. These include:

- a) Persistence of the 'fear factor' that prevents the Indian establishment and its military move anywhere close to the LAC in all the sectors defined after 1962. By putting

restriction on border patrol, set under the Limit of Patrols (LOP) post-1977, India consciously vacated areas supposedly inside the Indian LAC thus allowing the PLA to feely encroach into Ladakh territory. By this way, Depsang is almost gone and now troops hold a LAC II near Burtse, which is over 35 km inside the original LoC of 1959. Barring few pockets, the story is similar all along up to CNN point. Hot-Spring area appears badly defended - not sure, whether PLA has not constructed a road inside LAC here recently. PLA's assertion to grab 80 sq km area of Tible-Mane in Chumur Sector, which is an International Border (IB) is a new phenomenon. India needs to be vigilant even in the Karakoram Range along 116-kilometre IB from Pt 6599 to Pt 6190 (Chorten-chan Top). This is also poorly manned and there could be surprises.

- b) Sadly, Indian troops on the front, manned by Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), are not only limited in their mandate but also lack expertise. As compared, Chinese troops are oriented well on border affairs, including on the India-China diplomatic details. Shockingly, either the ITBP officers' sit in Sector Headquarter located 300-km away in Leh or bosses from Srinagar direct the troops on the LAC.
- c) Worse, ITBP troops lack surveillance equipments for monitoring key petrol points. The contrast remains stark on the other side. The PLA possess sensors and electronic monitoring devices not only for monitoring the Indian patrol movements but also to keep close watch on India's attempts at constructing road infrastructure in key areas of LAC points. The problem is acute in Demchok area – Indian troops simply cannot access Chrading La now.
- d) In another contrast, the PLA purely depends on motor vehicle and horses for their mobility. By contrast, Indian forces march patrolling areas on foot. The colossal telecommunication and road infrastructure disparity apart, border forces are short of vehicles and they get no air support during operational time.¹
- e) The panacea so far has been multiple agencies dealing with border security. Moreover, multiple maps are in existence and discrepancies in them create confusion. Sadly, the government does not have dedicated map experts.

All these are critical points that require serious thinking from the NDA government.

- a) To start with, South Block should break the strategic apathy to remove the nervousness and misgivings. It must also quickly simplify policy guidelines and fix accountability.
- b) Modi should talk to Xi and seek an interim boundary solution at least by having some sort of Friendly Pillars, call them *Shanti Stupas* along the border (almost 500 kilometers) in the Western Sector.

¹ ITBP lacks crucial equipment, Rajnath told *Deeptiman Tiwary*, TNN | Sep 9, 2014, 03.01AM IST

- c) Maintaining a high level of military preparedness and parity is essential, but India requires boundary specialization and the government should set up a border management authority.
- d) Holding on to a position is not enough one need to accomplish the task of improving economically depressed and poor infrastructure frontier regions.

Policy Recommendations

- a) China always casts a shadow over India's international standing and its ability to act as a legitimate player even in the South Asian region. Clearly, the boundary issue, China's suspicion over Tibet, China's use of Pakistan as proxy against India, et al has become fixated in India-China relations. These should fast become non-issues, because they only help to sustain the misperception and perpetuate mistrust.
- b) India-China hyperbole needs deflation. Bloated rhetoric hearing from media and strategic commentators from both sides are fine occasionally, but the real question is whether they serve the best interests.
- c) India and China has several areas to work together, from international trade to climate change, over which the interests converge. Possibly additional areas of convergence need exploration. It should include over-arching common threat of global Climate Change, tackling natural disasters, fighting terrorism and other emerging global imperatives. More than any time in the past decades, India and China may confront the danger of extremism and sectarianism, a prospect with large ramifications across the region. The stakes are indeed high for the two big civilizations. Of course, both will be loath to join the West to fight against ISIS. But cooperation with India is needed. It is here that the prospects for persuading China to alter the patterns in Pakistan, if not rethink its Pakistan policy, may be seriously undertaken. Of course, Sino-Pak relations are equally complex. Beijing had gambled with the friend for decades by heavily creating strategic assets in Pakistan. India's National Security Advisor (NSA) has rightly highlighted the point to President Xi that the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), where the Chinese have large presence, is fast becoming a stronghold of terrorist outfits that would ultimately push Jihadis across the border into India and China.
- d) The key issue still remains Tibet. The Dalai Lama is now willing to settle for living under the Chinese constitution, if it guarantees space for Tibetan culture. A sensible proposition though. The onus is upon China to rethink. Time is running out for Beijing; any restitution plan is possible only during the current Dalai Lama's lifetime. The stakes are high as problem transcends borders. To be sure, neither China nor India should desire radicalization of the Himalayas – not an impossible prospect though.
- e) Strangely, China and India never explored the idea of improving connectivity through

roads and railway lines that could potentially alter economic landscape and benefit millions. The easy flow of goods could boost trade and narrow down the trade deficit. China might propose several concepts along the "Silk-Route" including the Maritime Silk Road. Here India should quickly respond by offering "Spice Route" in opposite direction.

- f) On the economic front, India cannot build its economy and infrastructure based on insecurity. From this perspective, the targeted scrutiny and restrictions against Chinese state-owned enterprises such as in telecom sectors look entirely logical. This is one of the sticking points. Other countries have welcomed Chinese state enterprises in core sectors like electricity networks and ports building. They are subject only to investment regulatory approval. India needs a relook on this issue.
- g) India should push for a multiple pilgrimage corridors across the Himalayan ranges to access the Kailash and Manasarovar, supremely sacred for billions of Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. They could serve as engines of economic growth for the people living in the region. This is also imperative of promoting a brand of sustainable cultural tourism. Conversely, India is sitting atop millennia-old tourist mines. The Buddha-Industry alone could transform the lives of millions, providing lucrative career options to its youth. The followers of Shakyamuni (400-500 million already) link their spiritual destinies to India. Tangible actions are required not just for market import but also for staging India's soft-power lever. In fact, China is grabbing the leadership role of Buddhism for its geopolitical end. India cannot afford to lose its ancient wisdom tool. Of course, both India and China require a synergy for a nuanced and adept policy pursuit in this regard.
- h) While talking to President Xi, Modi should seek China's support for India reaching out to wider Eurasian space the access of which has so far been blocked by Pakistan. A way out could be to promote a regional market across the border, woven by a web of spiritual and commercial interests. Once viewed as absurd, the idea of India-China jointly cooperating in Central Asia could soon become a reality. Opening the Himalayan door could benefit India but delay could risk serious ramifications against China's increasing quest for Eurasian strategic minerals and water resources.
- i) Finally, coordinated policies are essential to mitigate the environmental challenges. Both India and China have little to gain from increased militarizing in the Himalayas where impact of climate change could cause greater devastation in the medium and long-term. No longer should the Himalayas be used as a card game. Instead, the time has come to jointly save the shared ecosystem for common benefits. Gradual glacial attrition means water scarcity. The case of Brahmaputra's planned diversion by China has raised some eyebrows in India. Here again the solution lies in culture than in politics. Just as the Mt. Kailash is the abode of Lord Shiva, the Shuomatan

Point or Brahmaputra's U-Bend is the home of *Vajra Yogini* – a sacred deity, worshipped by millions in both India and China. Eventually water, environment and culture would become the keystone of policy planning.

It does seem that the pulls of Asia have not disappeared. But can Modi and Xi break the ice to rebuild the Asian order? Perhaps it is difficult but not impossible if they start to build on the positives for a win-win relationship. It depends how the two leaders will stir the issues innovatively that will weigh the power of geo-political change in Asia. A cooperative thinking could herald a constituency of appreciation infusing enthusiasm and ultimately softening mistrust and muting the China threat. Finally, the aim should be to gradually transform the long militarized boundary into a humanized frontier zone that will serve the interests of both.