

# The Strategic Stasis in the India-China Relationship

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Why does a serious, rational and realistic discourse on China in India, and vice versa, still elude our respective grasps? A confusing and difficult question no doubt, but one which calls for an analysis of the contradictions that underlie India-China relations. This relationship is scrutinised in the context of the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's recent state visit that could have been marred by the earlier row over the Chinese "incursion" in Ladakh, but for an understanding that the relationship would not be made hostage to the boundary dispute.

Stasis (in political history) is a set of symptoms indicating an internal disturbance in both individuals and states.

– Thucydides

## The Contradictions

India-China relations today are primarily characterised by two contradictions, which invariably tend to impede and distort, both, a rational assessment of the achievements of the past decade as also clarity about charting the road ahead.

(1) The first contradiction is between the political understanding at the highest level of leadership, which strives to build and substantiate a strategic and cooperative partnership on the one hand and the reality of a bitter boundary dispute on the ground (with extant legacies of a bitter conflict half a century ago), which every now and then cracks open a deeply hostile and suspicious vein within the strategic and policymaking elite in both countries. In other words, we have on the one hand a broadening, deepening and enlarging arena – bilaterally, regionally and globally – of India-China interactions and the consistent harping on the negativities and the "trust deficit" between them, on the other.

(2) Second, trade and economic ties represent one of the most dynamic as also the most rapidly transforming aspects of the India-China relationship today and yet that aspect is also generating some serious (and some misplaced) concerns, since China's manufacturing strengths and industrial capacity virtually dictates the current picture. This is clearly a function of the structural imbalance stemming from the different levels of development and modernisation in both countries but is invariably perceived as a situation that only works to China's advantage.

The political/diplomatic process certainly appeared to have come up trumps in the recent face-to-face stand-off, spanning nearly a fortnight in April-May, between a small number of Chinese

and Indian troops in the Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) Sector in the Depsang Valley in western Ladakh, finally ending on 5 May 2013. There were, as expected, vociferous demands in most of the national media – print and electronic – by some representatives of the Indian strategic/security community for a strong (read military) response and forceful pushback of the Chinese "intrusion" (the term used to characterise the transgression by Chinese troops of the Indian perception of the Line of Control. Incidentally, it may be mentioned that the Chinese use the same term to refer to similar breaches on the part of the Indian troops).

It would be no exaggeration to say that this prologue to the new Chinese premier's visit was far more problematic than those we have witnessed in the past, but its resolution, in a manner of speaking, was also a tribute to the mechanisms that have been put in place, incrementally, by the two countries at different levels, over the past two decades. These were employed to defuse the unusually drawn-out – and definitely more serious – scenario. The scheduled visit of the Indian external affairs minister, which at one stage briefly appeared not so certain, then took place, from 9-11 May, paving the way for the visit by Li Keqiang, the new Chinese premier of the fourth generation leadership, from 19-22 May.

In the normal course of events, Manmohan Singh was to have visited China later this year. However, in his meeting with President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) summit in Durban in March 2013, the latter pushed protocol aside – with a request to schedule an early visit by China's new head of government. This made India the first country to be visited by Li. How much to make of this? A great deal – because symbolism does matter. Perceptions are indeed influenced and can be usefully harnessed. More importantly, this rescheduling also meant that for the first time both prime ministers would visit each other's countries in the same year.

For most analysts, Li's visit appeared to be coming at an inopportune time –

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with the hangover of the face-off, the atmospheric, it was felt, would be largely unfavourable. From a somewhat different perspective however, it could be argued that under the circumstances, the visit was not just beneficial (in terms of underscoring the priority accorded to the relationship), but necessary to affirm the political commitment to dialogue. It was also in tune with the logic that had broken the logjam in India-China relations with Rajiv Gandhi's visit in 1988 – the relationship would not be made hostage to the boundary dispute. So even as both reserved their differences on the matter, they would continue to work towards strengthening bilateral ties. However, some experts endorsed the holding of the visit as scheduled. They view "China's current willingness to reach out to India" as being "conditioned by the larger strategic context confronting" China – globally (the US and its "pivot to Asia") and regionally (the pressures building up in the South China Seas and the uncertainties regarding Afghanistan). Hence it would be "in our own interest to seize this moment" (Srinath Raghavan, "Seize the Chinese Moment", *The Hindu*, 17 May 2013).

While few would contest this, it skims lightly over the fact that we have now important constituencies building up within India, which are now pushing for greater engagement. Voices from the north-eastern part of the country can be increasingly heard championing cooperation with neighbouring countries, especially China. Further, shortly before Li's arrival, a former Member of Parliament from Arunachal Pradesh went to the extent of arguing in favour of accepting stapled Chinese visas for Indian citizens from Arunachal, who were desirous of travelling to China, so as to promote further opportunities for growth in the region.

### The Regional Perspective

But the argument has to be extended further. It is not just that China's strategic context is offering India the opportunities, but the possibilities that are opening up within our neighbourhood that should be imparting greater momentum to build this relationship. Needless to say,

Pakistan was on the Chinese premier's itinerary – this was essential to maintain the even-handed policy that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been following since the latter part of the 1990s. Pakistan would have obviously preferred a later date. Given that Zardari's mandate had run out and Nawaz Sharif had not yet taken over, much of the sheen went out from this high level visit. Some more symbolism here – and going by some of the writings by Pakistani strategic commentators, this did not speak very highly of the "all weather" relationship.

Take this assessment for instance:

Ideological strangers and culturally alien, Pakistan and China are forced to use poetic metaphors to describe their bilateral equation. But that means nothing when you consider that China is willing to do more in India than in Pakistan in terms of investment (Khaled Ahmed, "Three Can Be Company", *The New Indian Express*, 31 May 2013).

The more prescient pieces are already talking of exploring how Pakistan can take advantage of the expanding India-China economic ties. Interestingly, the Indian media – with its near total focus on the Indian Premier League (IPL) shenanigans at that point notwithstanding – or the strategic commentators for that matter, did not get preoccupied as usual, about Li Keqiang's Islamabad stop. This was a major change, compared

to the dire prognoses about the Sino-Pak anti-India thrust that we have seen in the past. The article cited above went on to say that

(T)he Pak-Chinese (joint) statement was bald, ill-composed, and didn't mention Gwadar, clearly because the Chinese didn't want to offend India. Not even the 'economic corridor' that will link Gwadar to China through the Karakoram Highway featured in it.

Even more interestingly, that joint statement also did not mention Kashmir. For once, certain sections within India and Pakistan are equally dis-satisfied with the outcome of a Chinese premier's visit!

But the shifts in the Sino-Pak relations have been underway for quite some time now and it would be an opportunity lost if Indian policymakers did not appreciate the extent of strategic space this opens up for India in the south Asian region. There was a time when our neighbours operated on the logic of "our enemy's enemy is our friend" and their linkages and friendship with China, was judged by the yardstick of India-China antagonism – this is fast turning around, in some measure due to some steady, proactive measures on India's part. But India does not have the kind of resources that enables China to contribute to infrastructure development in south Asia and herein lies the opportunity to partner with China in transforming the physical and material

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reality in this poorest “region” of the world, rather than let it be interpreted in terms of a “dog in the manger” attitude towards the role of outside powers here. An entirely new phase of south Asian regional integration can be inaugurated if we can correctly assess this change.

But that will be contingent on both sides ensuring that geopolitics be given a “low profile” – even as the high-level criss-cross of visits ensures that it maintains an edge. Manmohan Singh’s visit to Japan where the “common concerns” regarding China leavened their dialogue on deepening their “strategic partnership” is a case in point. As mentioned earlier, the logic of “enemy’s enemy is my friend” that our neighbours had appeared to follow at one stage should not become so obvious a leitmotif in our relations with Japan.

India had abandoned a project, grandiosely termed the “arc of democracies” (with Australia, the us and Japan) not so very long ago, correctly assessing that this was bound to backfire. The great thing about the post-bipolar international order was the opportunity it provided the developing world to pursue relations with a range of countries simultaneously, without any particular tie-up being overtly (or very obviously) directed at any third country. India’s relationship with Japan has to be pursued for the enormous all-round gains that it will bring to both.

### The Bilateral Dynamics

It makes no strategic sense to be hustled, by the strident domestic demands for responding to the seemingly Chinese strong-arm tactics on the border, with an in-your-face geopolitics. This is calculated to create further contradictions in the strategic context. There are many other visits and meetings taking place concurrently which would also have to take cognisance of these nuances. The Sri Lankan president’s China visit which concluded at about the same time as Li Keqiang’s in south Asia; the Xi-Obama meeting in early June in California, which will be followed by the us-China Strategic Economic Dialogue in July – all these will surely have their realpolitik edge. But Asia will be looking very closely at the leaders of India and China.

The significance of the visit went beyond the symbolism, although, as mentioned earlier, the DBO face-off did contribute to a marked lack of enthusiasm, bordering on the dismissive, in the mainstream writings/assessments of the visit and of the state of India-China relations. Having examined the Indian writings that have appeared over the years during these high-level visits, and comparing them with those that preceded and followed Li’s maiden visit, it must be stated that a limited but definite shift appears to be taking place, as we see more writings taking a somewhat cautiously balanced perspective and arguing for greater engagement. But the hardline/hawkish writings and commentaries naturally dominate public spaces and at the current juncture, have more traction.

Over and over again we have been told that the Indian efforts at negotiation amounted to appeasement or demonstrated our tendency to get easily intimidated; that efforts to react calmly were only downplaying or localising a very serious problem. In other words, machismo needs to be credibly displayed else we are confirming weak-kneed capitulation. While some have sought to decry what they see as an overly positive projection, others have attempted to warn about the PRC’s motives in extending this “handshake across the Himalayas” as yet another ruse to lull India into complacency about its “creeping” land-grabbing tactics. This is, of course, linked with the extant conjectures about why the intrusion and pitching of the tents inside Indian territory occurred when it did.

Until the two governments provide an official explanation, any account of the episode will remain open to question. From interpreting it as a master plan hatched in Beijing, to describing it as an attempt by a faction of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to test the new leadership’s resolve, to depicting it as the Chinese bid to bring the boundary negotiations on the front burner – we have been provided with explanations to suit every palate. An implicit acceptance of the authoritarian, monolithic Chinese leadership, working with the precision of a well-oiled machine, towards a carefully crafted grand strategy, underpins

these conjectures. There has been no cognisance of the factions that have riddled both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence in the PRC, which may be working at cross purposes; there seems to be no mindfulness of the deep ongoing debates within the former that are in serious disagreement over the direction of foreign policy in the recent past and above all, there has been no reflection on the attempts at course correction that has been underway in Chinese foreign policy over the past two-three years. Furthermore, the intensification of the bilateral interaction at the top levels, borne by the more than 30 meetings between the leaders on both sides over the past decade, does not appear to generate any confidence.

The resolution of the face-off was not assessed from the vantage point of a new leadership, attempting to stamp its own mark on the domestic and foreign face of the government. The nature of the negotiations and the sincerity of the dialogue were questioned – with the Indian leadership being hauled up for its perceived pusillanimity and lack of strategic clarity. A closer look at the man (and the leadership) India will be dealing with over the next decade, was missing – even as he went about his business of setting the stage with a fair degree of warmth and personal touches. Nobody needs to be swept off one’s feet – this is about developing an understanding and basis for future interaction. The argument being posited here is that it is perhaps not so much as a *lack*, but a *stasis* (as defined at the outset), that describes the strategic outlook of some sections in India – and it could well be used to describe some sections in China as well. Not unnaturally therefore, an affirmation of the importance of this relationship at the highest levels, at the end of a controversial and tense episode, was not seen as an achievement, nor was the frankness with which each side brought up their concerns and worries judged as a step forward.

### The Joint Statement

There is no denying that for the past couple of years or so, it was becoming increasingly apparent that India-China

relations, as also the India-China strategic partnership, needed a shot in the arm. Bilateral trade is generating a degree of unease/dissatisfaction with the deficit showing no indications of an early turnaround; the boundary negotiations appeared to be going nowhere; the issues of common concern at the regional level appeared to be dominated more by considerations of power politics and coordination on global concerns seems, at times, to have lost focus.

Simply put, India-China relations have been adrift. So the Joint Statement, signed by Manmohan Singh and Li Keqiang on 20 May 2013, needs to be looked at carefully to assess the outcome and achievements of this visit. A caveat may be useful here – a Joint Statement is about principles, the framework, or the code by which the relationship is sought to be governed. It is not a document that seeks to solve a specific problem or address a particular issue. So it is hardly surprising that the framers of the Joint Statement opted to steer clear of the details of the controversial issues and instead upheld the norms that have served the negotiation process so far. Any expectations that it would break fresh ground in the context of the face-off that preceded the visit would be misplaced. It bears repeating that while there are many aspects of the dialogue process that are unsatisfactory and there is scope for improvement in the working of some of the mechanisms, yet it has, in the main, served the purpose of keeping the border regions peaceful and held fast to the determination to resolve the dispute through negotiations.

The Joint Statement clearly represented an effort to place India-China relations within a larger, fundamental philosophical framework – not merely in terms of addressing the bigger picture, though that was also specifically highlighted on a number of occasions, but also in terms of an agenda of transformation. This is important, though usually dismissed as idealistic or aspirational – and not given its due weight. Secondly, it underscored the paradigm shaping the India-China relationship. Both India and China in the current period are focused on the development and modernisation of their

economies and enhancing the living standards of their peoples. This necessitates the adoption of policies, which would facilitate a stable and peaceful environment – for both India and China therefore, it is important to keep their relations on an even keel. Thirdly, it yet again stressed the criticality of a stable India-China partnership for peace and development in Asia and the world.

**Expanding Ambit of Cooperation**

In terms of the specifics, the Joint Statement listed out the entire gamut of issues that concern both countries at all levels of interaction – comprising 35 paragraphs, there is not much of significance that is left out. It would bear skimming over them.

The bilateral issues span

- the economic (establishing industrial zones, platforms for cluster-type development of enterprises);
- the financial (cooperation between their financial regulators, and institutions in setting up representative offices, funding for bilateral economic cooperation project);
- newer areas of cooperation (mitigation and management of earthquake and natural disasters, astronomy and astrophysics, technology research on climate change, traditional knowledge and medicine, bilateral cooperation in civil nuclear energy “in line with their respective international commitments” and cooperation on trans-border rivers);
- the social and cultural (youth exchanges, cooperation on Chinese language teaching, enhanced media exchanges and cooperation);
- the political (simplifying visa procedures, establishing twinning relationships between their cities/provinces, promoting trade, personnel movement and connectivity across the border, including greater facilitation to Indian pilgrims for the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra), and
- the military (maritime security and enhanced exchanges between the Army, Navy and Air Force).

At the regional level, the Statement enjoins both to work for the maintenance of peace and stability, promoting regional common development, through multi-lateral cooperation mechanisms in Asia

and collaborating on development projects of common interest in third countries, taking a positive view of each other’s participation in regional and subregional cooperation processes, and supporting each other in enhancing friendly relations with their common neighbours for mutual benefit, and win-win results. (It may be noted that this would apply to both sides – it does not only sanction China’s role in south Asia but also India’s, in east Asia and the Pacific.)

At the global level, both sides shall work towards ensuring that the 21st century should be marked by peace, security, development and cooperation. They will promote a multipolar world, democratise international relations, economic globalisation and cultural diversity and enhance their cooperation in multilateral forums including the United Nations, on climate change, the Doha Development Round of the World Trade Organisation (wto), energy and food security, etc. They will also support prohibition and destruction of all nuclear weapons and opposition to the weaponisation of and an arms race in outer space. Further, they will oppose to terrorism in all its forms and increase cooperation and coordination within the BRICS and G-20 frameworks.

What needs specific mention is a decision to strengthen connectivity in the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) region for closer economic, trade, and people-to-people linkages – a proposal that has long been advocated by a dedicated group of scholars but which has always fallen victim to geopolitical calculations (Kishan Rana and Patricia Uberoi, “India’s Northeast States, the BCIM Forum and Regional

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Integration”, ICS Monograph, New Delhi, 2012, at <http://icsin.org/mono.pdf>).

As mentioned above, joint statements provide the framework. It remains to be seen whether this impressive range of issues would be limited to aspirations and “symbolic” gestures or grounded in action.

### The Epilogue

More than the trust deficit, what we have is an “information deficit” and a “communication deficit”. Very little direct understanding or knowledge exists on either side about the other and therefore exacerbates the tendency to be judgmental. The blame always rests with the other side. This of course taps into the rather problematic vein referred to earlier – the lack of information which handicaps our scholars and researchers and their ineffective attempts in apprising and preparing the people for the inevitable compromise that will form the basis of any settlement of the dispute.

As some western scholars have put it more bluntly, “in both countries, understandings of each other’s history, culture, and much else remain quite shallow among political elites and professionals, to say nothing of the public” (“China and the Other Asian Giant: Where Are Relations with India Headed?” *China File*, A Conversation between Michael Kulma, Mark Frazier, Susan Shirk). Frazier goes on to say that

(T)his too often results in a distorted view of how Indians perceive China and how the Chinese look at India. News outlets, blogs, and other foreign policy forums are dominated by non-specialists who nonetheless speak with authority and credibility on how India should handle relations with China, and vice versa. Most often, hawkish views grab the headlines.

Or we have downright ignorance as in the case of a regional television channel of one of the southern states of India, which uploaded a video of a news clip on the internet with the caption “China President Xi Jinping Visits to India” (sic).

The lack of understanding or inability to correctly assess the other side’s standpoint is also a fallout of the cultural gap or difference in mentality. As the current Chinese ambassador to India described it on one occasion, the Chinese tend to talk in terms of “principles”, while Indians

go in more for the specifics. Take the case of an objective, eminently prized by many in India, viz, the permanent membership of the UN Security Council. The Chinese have officially addressed this objective by a formulation that they view as supportive of India, but which is viewed by many Indians as a vague formulation. The Chinese however insist on using the same phrase – in paragraph 32 of the Joint Statement it is stated that

China attaches great importance to India’s status in international affairs as a large developing country, *understands and supports India’s aspiration to play a greater role in the United Nations including in the Security Council* (emphasis added).

A large section of the Indian elite would be truly disarmed were the Chinese to depart from their usual formulation and make a clear, unambiguous statement in this regard, as have some other friends of India.

### The Conundrum

This brings us to the conundrum. Given the challenges it poses, the concerns it generates and above all, the enormous possibilities inherent in this relationship, why does a serious, rational and realistic discourse on China in India, and vice versa, still elude our respective

grasps? Strangely, or perhaps not so strangely, none of our strategic commentators considered a recent Chinese official publication – the first ever Blue Book on India – as worthy of mention or discussion. It was reported in a national daily, a week before the arrival of Premier Li, with the predictable title – “Red Dragon Plays by the Blue Book: Ahead of Li Visit, Beijing Circulates Carefully-Crafted Official View on India” (Saibal Dasgupta, *The Times of India*, 14 May 2013). “(T)he purpose of the Blue Book is to inform ordinary Chinese people about the rise of India as a fast developing and powerful country”, according to one of the contributors to this book and may be seen as an “official view” of India. This book certainly merits a serious analysis and review. One may in passing make note of a pervasive tendency, even in serious and thoughtful writing here, to refer to the PRC as the dragon, with all the attendant fire-breathing and sabre-rattling imagery.

It is arguable whether it is the contradictions that create the conundrum or the conundrum that intensifies the contradictions – maybe it is simple dialectics after all – but their contribution to an overall dysfunctionality must not be taken lightly.

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