

**India-China Cooperation: Major Determinants**

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The Indian Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee's visit to China in July 2003 generated mixed reactions in India. A section of scholars had viewed the visit as unproductive so far the boundary question and Sino-Pak military collaboration are concerned. The border trade through Sikkim has been criticised as unilateral. A small group of scholars however, viewed that the Vajpayee visit was continuation of the ongoing process of engagement between the two Asian giants.

While both the views are not incorrect, their arguments ignore an important component of foreign policy that is the international situation and the concomitant domestic obligations which necessitate reformulation of foreign policy. The nature and scope of relationship between the two countries, for all intents and purposes, had been determined by the developments in the international sphere, particularly after the boundary dispute. Moreover, the dismemberment of the Soviet Union has added a new dimension to their relationship. International relations have been changing fast in recent years after the attack on twin towers in New York. In view of these changes, China has been attempting to adopt an accommodative posture in its relation with other countries including India in recent years.

In light of changing global scenario in the post September 11 context and India's policy toward its neighbours, this paper discusses the pattern of cooperation between India and China after the visit of the Indian Prime Minister to China, highlighting the international situation as well as the national interests of China and India as the key determinants for engagement.

**Sino-Indian Engagement: Positive Aspects**

On the positive side the visit by the Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, may be considered as a success though the most important bilateral problems remain unresolved. The theme of the discussions can be categorised in two ways:

- (1) Their strategic role in the international sphere and
- (2) Development of trade linked cooperation at the bilateral level.

So far as the first issue is concerned the discussion centered round the following:

- (a) Dealing with the shortcomings of global economic and technological arrangement,
- (b) Exploring possibilities of mutual cooperation,
- (c) Playing an effective role in world security arrangements and the ASEAN security forum
- (d) Cooperate to revive the role of the U.N. and

(e) Strengthen multipolarity at the international level.

The U.S. dominance in international security affairs camouflaged in its strategy of fighting terrorism may be one of the reasons that has compelled China to work together with India. There are other reasons, like the growing U.S.A.-India cooperation in the recent past and the Chinese conception of a multi polar world, the outline of which is still hazy but targeted at asymmetrical and undemocratic international relations. In this context, to prepare the ground for better bilateral engagement, India and China have kept the more contentious issues aside and concentrated on areas where cooperation could be easier like trade. At the same time, a cautious beginning has been made to address the thorny issue of border settlement. Infact, the most significant outcomes of the visit of Atal Behari Vajpayee has been the appointment of political representatives for the boundary settlement

Sino-Indian trade across the disputed border is presumed to have made the process of solution to the border problem easier. Moreover, other areas of bilateral cooperation have been identified like (a) law and administration, (b) education and health, (c) renewable energy and non-conventional energy (d) ocean science and technology and (e) space research. It is believed that cooperation in these wide ranging areas would create mutual trust and provide an outlet for solving more contentious issues. Since the Sino-Indian parley began in 1988, both the countries have agreed to conduct their bilateral relationship for mutual advantage without focussing on their disagreement on the boundary issue. The nine Agreements signed by Mr. Vajpayee during the visit were in consonance with agreements signed between China and India in 1988 and 1993 in China and in 1996 and 2002 in India.

### **Joint Declaration**

The Joint Declaration exposit high level political will to further consolidate the gains made in Sino-Indian relationship since 1988 and it was also reiterated by both the leaders that differences between them will not be allowed to affect the over all development of bilateral relations. Its importance lies in the principles governing bilateral relations and the emphasis on comprehensive cooperation. Though India has not received any categorical affirmation of China's stand on the merger of Sikkim with India, the border trade agreement involves permission from Indian authorities for traders coming from Tibet which can be a de facto recognition of Sikkim as an integral part of India.[1] As per the joint declaration it is hoped that China will be more serious in resolving the boundary dispute. The process will be expedited at two levels; one by the Joint Working Group and other by the special political representatives designated by China and India. The Joint Working Group (JWG) will continue to work on delineating the line, while the political representatives of both the countries will explore political perspectives for practical solution to the problem.

However, the deliberations did not concentrate effectively on the two most important issues which have weakened the confidence building measures. These are the boundary dispute, the military ties with Pakistan and China's defence cooperation with several of India's neighbours.

## **The Boundary Imbrolio**

For over four decades the boundary dispute between China and India has remained unresolved. The reported intrusion of Chinese troops into Arunachal Pradesh and reference of Sikkim as a country soon after Mr. Vajpayee visit thwarted the gesture of exchange of the visit and issuance of the Joint Declaration. Though the disputed issue has been entrusted to the JWG and to the political representatives for its solution, it has become a trump card for China to keep the tension prolonging indefinitely.

The past experience of the negotiations show, China has not been serious enough in defining the LoAC. China seems to be keen on defining the line as it was drawn on November 7, 1959. The date is important for China as on that date Chou-en-Lai had defined the Line of Actual Control (LoAC) in a letter written to Nehru. In 1962, China had fought a war with India on the pretext that India crossed the line when it built 43 posts in Ladakh by establishing posts beyond the Mc Mohan line drawn in 1914. In June 1987, the Chinese Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, Liu Shuqing, stated, "if it has to be drawn it must be in conformity with the line drawn on November, 7, 1959." China expressed its displeasure on the establishment of two Indian posts, in 1987 in the Sumdorong valley beyond the Mc Mohan line. At the sixth JWC meeting that was held in July 1993, Vice Foreign Minister of China, Tang Jia Xuan, suggested that the LoAC be the one which is well known to both the sides which has made the issue more ambiguous.

At the backdrop of history[2] the Chinese stand on settlement of the border dispute remains a non-starter. It may be recalled that the establishment of the Joint Working Group on the boundary question followed the Rajiv Gandhi- Li Peng joint communiqué of December 23, 1988. A major achievement of this was the agreement of September 7, 1993 for maintaining peace and tranquility along the LoAC. Article 6 of the 1993 agreement explicitly states that the two sides agreed that references to the actual line of control in the agreement would not prejudice their respective positions on the boundary question. As per the provisions in Article 8 an expert group was constituted for resolving differences between the two sides on the alignment of the LoAC and reduction of forces. The differences in the LoAC were again identified in the agreement of November 29, 1996. According to the agreement in the east they are broadly the areas around the Namachu, Chen Ju, Tulng La, Ashaphila, Longju, and Che Dong. In the middle sector it is Barahoti plus for other areas. The western sector includes Trig heights near the Karakoram pass, Pangong Lake and Demchok in the south. But even if this is adjusted, China may not withdraw its claim on 90,000 sq.km in Arunachal Pradesh. India may not reconsider its claim on 38 sq.km in Ladakh which China has occupied. If the status quo cannot be changed there is no reason as to why China has not recognised India's claim on Arunachal Pradesh.

For the last fifteen years the parleys and exchange of maps on the boundary have not yielded any substantial result. Mr. Vajpayee's visit also failed to achieve any tangible result on this issue. This can be understood from the statement that "the exercise for delineating the 4056 km long LoAC will continue which is a big road block to establish firm India-China relationship". Except in the Sikkim sector, India China boundary has never been defined. The expert group that met in June 2002, refused to accept India's sample map as the western sector included 5180 sq km of area which Pakistan gave to China. The 14th JWG meeting did not make any progress on the subject. In the middle sector the LoAC has been clarified but no accord has been signed as yet. It

is found that since 1962, China's perception and the global situation have changed radically. India seeks to revise the status quo by a boundary accord but China's response is negative though it has resolved its boundary dispute with several of its neighbours.[3]

The Agreement on the present McMahon line was signed when both India and People Republic of China (PRC) were non-existent in their present forms. It was the British government in India and the representatives of Tibet who had signed the treaty in Shimla in April 27, 1914. After the PRC came into being the Indian Government had recognised it and friendly relations were established between both the governments. During this period, India has assurance from Chou-en lai that the Mac Mohan line will be recognised as the boundary between the two countries. However, in fifties the events in Tibet and the flight of Dalai Lama to India contributed to the deterioration of the relations between the two.

After the Tibet incident, China refused to recognise the boundary on the plea that the treaty was signed by local authorities of Tibet and the British government in India. China was never a party to it. Interestingly it has accepted the demarcation of the boundary on the basis of Mac Mohan line with Burma. Moreover, it has also accepted the Tibet-Nepal Accord to which it was not a party. China has claimed Aksai Chin in the western sector as its territory which it argues to be a part of Sinkiang. This is strategically important for China because the road link between China and Tibet passes through Aksai Chin. The northern sector was seemingly not disputed till 1962 but after the 1962 war China has gained control over 38,500 km of territory in this sector. Now China has claimed Tawang as part of its territory which according to British sources was never a part of China.[4]

Though India has recognised Chinese suzerainty over Tibet, China has not reciprocated in the same manner. One reason that could be cited for the non-reciprocation by China in not settling the border dispute is because that would lead to the concentration of India's military assets on the Pakistani front and decisively shift the balance against Pakistan.[5]

### **Sino-Pak Military Collaboration**

Pakistan's friendship with China is guided by its antagonism with India. The animosity between China and India after the boundary war has been successfully capitalised by Pakistan to isolate India in the region. A major consequence of Pakistani diplomatic manoeuvre was competition for the acquisition of conventional and nuclear weapons, arms build up across the border and increased militancy in Jammu and Kashmir. Its relation with a veto powered UN member of Asia served as a powerful tool to check India in the international forums. The most important development of Sino Pak relationship was the military collaboration, both conventional and nuclear. For China, Pakistan served as a barrier to contain India.

The Chinese were ambiguous in their response to regional security situation arising from Sino-Pak nuclear cooperation. The visits at the official level and issuance of the joint declarations between India and China since 1988, have been successful in bringing about changes in the perception of the both countries in general and China in particular. The biggest ever Chinese military delegation arrived in India to discuss modalities for the first ever Sino-Indian Air force exercise. The Indian Air Force has described this as a step forward for better relations.

Comprehensive military exercises may dispel the ambivalent attitude among the three forces of both the countries and assuage the tension arising from Sino Pak military collaboration.[6]

### **India-China and the U.S.**

Even though India had pioneered non-alignment in its foreign policy, the post-war international situation was not supportive to sustain the policy. A number of internal as well as external factors accounted for coming closer to the two super powers. But the nature of power configuration was such that friendship with one power created suspicion in another. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, India has been getting closer to the United States. Precisely after the September 11/2001 there is a qualitative change in Indo-U.S. relationship. In view of this global change the diplomatic circle in China consider it imperative to continue the dialogue process with India.

China was closer to USA during the cold war when its relations with the former USSR deteriorated. Since then it has continued to improve its relations with the U.S. Trade related disputes and human rights issues have resulted in differences of opinion but China has been cautious in not impairing its relations with the U.S. over such issues. At the same time China has been disturbed by U.S. dominance in Asia-Pacific region. During the cold war option was open for developing countries to ally with any one of the super power for managing their international relations. In the post cold war China finds hosts of impediments in pursuing its national interests and is also aware of its limited capabilities to confront U.S. power in the region. China is concerned and its present approach for friendly ties with India is guided by its calculations to pose a countervailing power-relationship to the present improving Indo-US relations, and challenge American dominance in Asia.

The relationship between China and the U.S. is not without suspicion and competition. It did not approve the U.S. intervention in Iraq without U.N. mandate. However, it has arranged a meeting between the U.S. and North Korea (DPRK) in Beijing. The outcome of the meeting indicated Chinese support for the stand taken by DPRK. China does not approve the growing U.S. dominance in the Asian region and its relations with important Asian countries on the Pacific rim namely, Japan, South Korea and Australia. It is observed that for the U.S. Japan and South Korea are the key allies in the Asia Pacific region. Japan's agreement to send troops to Iraq though in a non-combat logistic role has further added to the U.S. influence in the Pacific region. However, China is no less important because it is the only veto powered member of Asia in the U.N. Furthermore, US has also recognised China as a giant economic power but at the same time it could employ all diplomatic tactic at its command to restrain China's emergence as a potential power in this region. At the moment the diplomatic game is more political than military in clipping Chinese power. US involvement in the Asia Pacific region is considered by China as a plot to thwart its efforts to emerge as an influential member in this region. Therefore, it is playing the diplomatic game skillfully.

The ambivalent Sino-US relations can be understood from the report of the Second Round Of The Crawford Meeting, held in Beijing on July 28, 2003. It states that "Beijing is pursuing its long term political goals of developing its comprehensive national power and ensuring a favourable 'strategic configuration of power. While seeing opportunity and benefit in

interactions with the United States primarily in terms of trade and technology Beijing apparently believes that the United States poses a significant long-term challenge”. This can be seen as the American normative view of China in the changed circumstance. The report also mentioned that China’s overall modernisation of security force was to “meet challenges from potential targets as Taiwan, South China Sea and for border defence. China’s military modernisation is done with assistance from Russia and its military preparedness is ready for immediate application”. China has expressed strong dissatisfaction over the report and has affirmed that it has indisputable right to safeguard state sovereignty and territorial integrity. The dispute over Taiwan is a major irritant in China-US relations. Interestingly U.S. implicitly recognised PRC’s one China policy. But Taiwan has assumed almost a similar status as Cuba had to the former USSR during the cold war. The soft attitude of US towards Taiwan has an overbearing influence in all negotiations between China and U.S. In addition, the principled, if not open diplomatic, support for Tibetan autonomy is a clear game to keep up the pressure on China. Just as Tibet émigré in India are not taken easily by China so also U.S. support to Taiwan is treated with extreme caution in China.

In bipolar world during the period of the Cold War, hostility with Pakistan could be managed through a friendly USSR. After its collapse India has started putting emphasis on friendly relations with the U.S. To manage Pakistan, in this changed context, India has to be closer with China as well. After the U.S. led war on terrorism, India has to develop and maintain friendly relations with as many countries as possible. India alone cannot confront a hostile nuclear Pakistan; neither can it contain Sino-Pak military collaboration. Moreover economic relations will be mutually advantageous and therefore India has been keen to maintain its improved relationship with China. But at the moment, neither U.S. nor China desires a powerful and tension free India. The burning problems with its neighbours may not be allowed to culminate into a full-scale war but no opportunity will be missed to keep up the tension.

There are differences of approach between India and China on issues relating to non-proliferation, the presence of the Dalai Lama, India’s candidature for a permanent seat in the Security Council and China’s relation with Pakistan. China has not supported India’s membership in the Security Council. Acknowledging the impediments and the happenings in the global order, India should be cautious in dealing with China because its policies may negatively affect India’s interests. At the same time it should be concerned about the Sino-Pak military cooperation and Sino-Myanmar defence arrangements. A better approach for India will be to express its concern in appropriate forums, increase its cooperation with as many countries in the neighbourhood as well as outside and enhance its economic potential and military capability.

### **Concluding Observations**

The major arguments against Vajpayee’s visit was that (1) India made unilateral concessions on Sikkim - Tibet trade, (2) There was no progress made on the border dispute (3) There was no change in the mechanism for border talks (4) There was no assurance on cessation of nuclear and military collaboration with Pakistan. (5) India has also not raised core issue such as Pakistani nuclear and military programme, WMD transfers and naval posts in Myanmar.

Of all these issues, the territorial issue is to be resolved through bilateral negotiations. Most of the other issues such as China's role in Pakistan nuclear and missile programmes, its relations with Myanmar are to be dealt with diplomatically. These issues have been raised and addressed since the Chinese President, Jiang Zemin's visit to India in 1996. Ever since, China has been adjusting its policies towards India and Pakistan[7] which became evident at the time of the Kargil War. India's enhanced conventional and nuclear capability as well as its confidence to deal with China has undermined the Chinese "Middle Kingdom" concept. Some of these problems have been allayed through discussion with China. Both have reiterated it time and again so that neither poses as a threat to the other. The Indo-Pak relations have shown signs of improvement with the opening of land route and subsequent talks. The new Chinese leadership has appreciated Dalai Lama's offer of talks on Tibet. For about last one year the Dalai Lama has been preparing to make a deal with China by sending his envoys. He is willing to return to China if it allows him to go back without preconditions. This statement followed the recent visit of Dalai Lama to the U.S. The release of several Tibetan political prisoners indicates that China is responding positively[8]. But differences between the two are still too wide to be bridged and the Dalai Lama's demand for self-rule for Tibet is not favourably received by China.

After Vajpayee's visit the discussion on the disputed boundary will be on real issues and not on flimsy ones like the territorial issue encompassing thousands of kilometers of territory seized, occupied or claimed by the other. Both the countries have claimed that solutions to the boundary dispute are to be sorted out through JWG meetings and specifically appointed political personnel to look into the matter. Chinese official pronouncements have indicated their willingness to improve relationship with India as well as not to threaten each other's security. There are also indications to discuss important aspects of the boundary dispute and resolve the issue on the basis of "equality, mutual understanding, mutual accommodation and mutual adjustment".[9]

The boundary problem has been continuing since the failure of Nehru-Zhou en lai talks in 1960. In successive stages the differences have been sorted out. The opening of the Nathu-la pass may be the outcome of the talks for the last fifteen years. The approach has divided the long border into three separate segments, each to be discussed and settled separately. Of course some scholars would like the whole border to be treated as one without which this could not be really solved but certain compromises have to be made to satisfy both sides. India has changed its stance by agreeing to border trade across Nathu-la of Sikkim because of the strategic position of Sikkim and with a view that this will cease to be an issue in China India relations. The de facto situation on the boundary issue seems to have been made acceptable by both sides until a final boundary agreement is reached. India has the Mc Mohan Line and China has the Xingiang-Tibet Road that crosses the Aksai Chin in Ladakh. A compromise formula has to be reached for which both the parties have to generate national consensus. The Vajpayee visit has discussed the principles which may be helpful in arriving at a solution.

The negative fall out of Vajpayee visit is the recognition of Tibet as an autonomous region of China. The Indian Government has defended its stand by stating that there is no change in India's official position as defined in the 1954 agreement. But this stand has created lot of confusion as the earlier agreements referred to trade and cultural cooperation between Tibet region of China and India whereas, the 2003 declaration refers to Tibet Autonomous Region. The treaty was valid for eight years. In the eighth year that is in 1962, the war broke out. Whether the

treaty has since been renewed or not is unclear still. If the Indian Government denies any change in India's official position it may be presumed that the treaty is still valid. But China has refused to accept India's sample map of the western sector which included Pakistani occupied Kashmir and the 5,180 sq km which India says Pakistan ceded to China. China still sticks to its position to exclude the areas of the Karakoram pass from discussion with India. As the border relates to the LoAC the map presented by India ruffled the Chinese because China has serious reservations about the LOAC. Hence India should not expect that the incursions would end even after the boundary accord will be reached on western, eastern and middle sectors. The big question is whether China recognises India as non-NPT nuclear power which has not been addressed by China. The confidence building measure can be further strengthened if China backs India for a permanent member of the Security Council.

A new perception about relations among nations in the region is emerging since the nineties. There is a growing convergence of interests but the inertia of the yester-years still prevail. India and China have been drawing closer because of the changed scenario and the realpolitik approach in their diplomacy. The war against terrorism and the approach of US is clear disregard of multi-lateral agency like UN have created the context for regional and international co-operation. Many strategic analysts have predicted greater co-ordination of policies and approaches among India, China and Russia in future, even if each one of them seeks to strengthen its relationship with US. The present scenario thus indicates that a coalition of countries in the developed and developing world may be necessary for resolving international crises. China and India are thus poised for a fundamental shift in their approaches vis-a-vis the world at large and are beginning to understand the value of cooperation between them. At such a critical juncture India has to develop a proactive foreign policy and in order to have a peaceful solution to the problems with China, India has to explore several channels like better relations with major powers of the world, increase its credibility in the South Asian region, sustain its diplomatic efforts to keep Pakistan engaged. Simultaneously it has to strive to improve its economy and defence so that its concerns will be taken care by the potential nations of the world.

### **End Notes**

1. "Instances from history indicate that in 1954 Nehru had misconstrued the border trade through mountain passes as Chinese acknowledgement of the frontier and no sooner was the agreement signed China claimed Barahoti in Uttaranchal, and intruded south of NITI and Shipki passes which were specified in the border accord. But even Vajpayee is saying that the border trade agreement is a tacit recognition of Sikkim by China. India is committing the same mistakes it has committed earlier". Brahma Chellaney, "That Sinking d'ej'avu", *Hindustan Times*, July 18, 2003.
2. Deng Xiaoping offered the status quo as altered in 1962 subject to mutual accommodation. He was of the view that India should make concessions in the western sector and China in the eastern sector, on the basis of the mutually controlled borderline in a package plan.
3. China has followed a specific pattern of settling the outlines and then fill the details by the experts in solving its boundary problem with Burma (1960), Nepal, (1960), Pakistan (1963), Mongolia 1963, Afghanistan 1963, Soviet Union 1954, Russia 1991, Kazakhstan 1994, Bhutan 1998 and Vietnam 2000.

4. Tawang was acquired by India from Tibet in 1914. China had not protested when, on February 12, 1951, Major R. Khating took over Tawang by evicting Tibetan administration. A. G. Noorani, *Frontline* September 12, 2003. Ranjit Singh Kalha, *Hindustan Times*, June 23, 2003.
5. China does not want the LoAC to become the proper boundary. Its preference is for a political settlement, a package deal based on status quo subject to concessions by both the sides. This is but fair. We need to decide what we can concede and what we should insist upon. A. G. Noorani, "Fall of the Map", *Hindustan Times*, July 8, 2003.

As far back as June 1960 China's officials presented to their Indian counterparts pass from discussion with India. So far the areas to the west of Karakoram pass was concerned China said both sides must have matter of fact approach and should avoid serious political questions. Gen. S. Padnabhan said on January 14, 2001 "that perceptions on the LoAC were poles apart. The MEAs 2002-03 annual report the process of exchange of maps have been in the middle sector is completed evidently the LoAC on accord on its alignment would be an achievement and that to a limited one" *Hindustan Times*, July 1, 2003. India's Defence Minister George Fernandes has spoken of the relative easing of tension and even good interaction between the armies at places like Nathu-la, *Hindustan Times*, July 2, 2003.

6. "Bartering concrete concessions for fond hopes Vajpayee gave away the trade card on Sikkim, India's only bargaining power - and put India's imprimatur on China's annexation of TAR the Chinese name for central Tibetan plateau since 1965. Dropping the key word autonomous and switching from it reiterates to recognize Vajpayee shifts India's stand in the eyes of international law... The Indian side recognizes that the Tibet autonomous region is part of the territory the people's republic of China and reiterates that it does not allow Tibetans to engage in anti China political activities in India. This is the first explicit Indian recognition of TAR's absorption by China. Also by narrowing Tibet to just TAR the plateau where less than half of the ethnic Tibetans live is India implicitly conceding the forcible incorporation of Tibet's large outer territories in the Chinese provinces of Quinghai, Siachin, Gansu, and Yunan" Bowling Low, Brahma Chellaney, *Hindustan Times*, July 2, 2003.
7. J. N. Dixit, "Understanding Each other", *Hindustan Times*, July 17, 2003.
8. *Hindustan Times*, September 9, 2003
9. J.N. Dixit, No. 7.