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469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



India-China Talks: Full-Scope Security is Potential Issue

P S Suryanarayana¹

Abstract

China's new leader Xi Jinping has called for steps to "deepen" "military and security trust" in Sino-Indian relations. In his first meeting with India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Durban on 27 March 2013, the Chinese President struck a cordial and upbeat note. Reciprocating these sentiments, Dr Singh suggested that a "joint mechanism" be set up to protect the rights of lower riparian India in the context of China's ongoing efforts to harness waters of the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra). The economic logic of such a 'mechanism', if set up, will supplement the political logic of the existing forum of Special Representatives who are trying to settle the Sino-Indian border dispute. In addition, India and China are already engaged in overall economic dialogue. In panoramic strategic terms, therefore, a potential Sino-Indian agenda focused on economic and military concerns can help address full-scope security issues. Full-scope security, as a term being conceived in political diplomacy, is adapted from the idea of full-scope safeguards in civil-nuclear diplomacy.

¹ Mr P S Suryanarayana is Editor (Current Affairs) at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isaspss@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

Introduction: Overlapping Priorities

Xi Jinping, the new plenipotentiary head of state and leader of the long-governing Communist Party of China, has signalled his priorities in foreign policy towards key powers like the United States and Russia at one level and India at another echelon.

The major talking-points in Mr Xi's exclusive meeting with India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Durban (South Africa) on 27 March 2013 show that the two countries share a range of overlapping but not entirely-congruent priorities. However, there was no dissonance in the overarching Sino-Indian message. The two leaders categorically indicated their shared preference to continue cordial bilateral dialogue on issues of contention as also common interest.

The timing of the Xi-Singh meeting, which took place on the occasion of a BRICS summit, was of course dictated by the diplomatic calendar of this relatively new forum of emerging and aspiring powers, namely Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. In economic terms China is decisively ahead of the other four countries in this grouping. In some contrast, Russia – still a military superpower because of its high-tech profile in the domain of nuclear and conventional weapon-systems – is variously distinct from each of the other four countries. However, the Xi-Singh meeting, their first since the latest change of guard at the helm of affairs in China, was in no way influenced by the differentials within BRICS. Of utmost importance to the two leaders, in their get-acquainted and set-the-agenda meeting, was their respective national interest as perceived by them.

Insulating Broad Ties from Border Dispute

In a fundamental sense, the respective national interest of India and China, in a purely bilateral context as different from their global aspirations, is still anchored to the Himalayan border dispute between these two Asian mega-state neighbours. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Mr Xi emphasised that “China and India should improve and make good use of the [existing] mechanism of Special Representatives to strive for a fair [and] rational solution-framework acceptable to both sides as soon as possible”.² In the meantime, he said, “the two sides should continue to safeguard peace in their border areas and prevent the issue from affecting bilateral relations”.³

It is arguable that there is hardly anything new in Mr Xi's call for insulating the overall China-India relationship from the inertia that might have been generated by their prolonged failure to resolve their long-standing border dispute. Nor is it novel to urge the need for a fair

² Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, *President Xi Jinping Says World Needs Common Development of China and India When Meeting with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh 2013/03/28*, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn>. Accessed on 28 March 2013

³ Ibid.

framework-solution to settle the dispute to mutual satisfaction. What is relatively new, however, is his parallel call to “improve” the existing negotiating forum of Special Representatives and to arrive at a framework-settlement “as soon as possible”. Outwardly, here too, there is nothing exciting about the advocacy of streamlining an existing “mechanism” and injecting some sense of urgency into the negotiations. But those familiar with the glacial pace of the Sino-Indian border parleys will want to know how the current forum of Special Representatives, set up almost a decade ago, can be “improved”. As this is written, neither Mr Xi nor Dr Singh has elucidated this aspect in the public domain. There is also no clear sign that the two leaders had now agreed upon any firm steps to streamline the forum of Special Representatives.

After the Xi-Singh meeting in Durban, India has not at all indicated any sense of unease over the Chinese views on these inter-related aspects of border talks. Of continuing relevance, therefore, to this dimension of Sino-Indian dialogue are the recent signs that the two countries have indeed begun to walk the talk in their negotiations on the boundary dispute.⁴

Of considerable significance to the border talks is an official Chinese view that was now communicated by Mr Xi to Dr Singh on the issue of cooperative engagement between the militaries of the two countries. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has cited Mr Xi as having told Mr Singh in Durban that “China and India should broaden exchanges and cooperation between their armed forces and [also] deepen mutual military and security trust”.⁵ It is indeed axiomatic in the current post-Cold War logic of international relations that cooperative mil-to-mil engagement between any two countries with unsettled issues can be a confidence-building measure (CBM). For India and China, still engaged in exploring CBMs, Mr Xi’s latest suggestion must be welcome indeed.

“Mutual military and security trust”, if attained in good measure, can constitute the fundamental bedrock of future Sino-Indian relationship. With these two nuclear-armed countries seeking detente with deterrence for several years now, especially in the context of their compatible and globally-valid pledges of ‘no-first-use’ of atomic weapons, the proposition of Sino-Indian military and security trust is not unthinkable.

Full-scope ‘Security Trust’

At Durban, Dr Singh clearly sought to enlarge the scope of “security trust” to encompass non-military aspects as well. Talking to Indian journalists after his meeting with Mr Xi, Dr Singh noted that he did discuss with the Chinese leader a cross-border issue of mutual trust in regard to a question of India’s economic (as different from military) security.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of these recent signs, see ISAS Insights No. 193, *India-China Border Parleys: New ‘Signs’ of Walking the Talk*, by P S Suryanarayana, 14 December 2012. <http://www.isas@nus.edu.sg>

⁵ Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China, op.cit., <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn>

*Amplifying this aspect of India-China engagement, Dr Singh said: “I also took the opportunity to raise the issue of trans-border river systems and I requested the Chinese Government to provide a joint mechanism to enable us to assess the type of construction activity that is going on in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. The President of China assured me that they were quite conscious of their responsibilities and the interest of the lower riparian countries. As regards the specific mechanism that I had suggested, he said that they would have it further looked into. But as of now, our assessment is that whatever activity [is] taking place on the Brahmaputra region in Tibet, they are essentially the run-of-the-river projects and therefore there is no cause for worry on our part”.*⁶

The *Brahmaputra* (the *Yarlung Tsangpo* in Chinese parlance), which flows from Tibet in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) into India, has been in the news in recent years for some economic reasons on both sides. It is felt in some quarters that the dams being built by China across that river system might harm the economic interests of lower-riparian India. Dr Singh has now disclosed that India would like China to agree to a bilateral ‘mechanism’ on a cross-border economic issue. The proposed ‘mechanism’ can be fashioned somewhat (if not entirely) on the lines of the existing forum of Special Representatives who are trying to resolve the boundary dispute. If viewed in this perspective, New Delhi is beginning to be proactive on aspects of Sino-Indian economic security – somewhat on the lines of Beijing’s activism on matters of bilateral military and security trust.

Mr Xi’s emphasis on the need to “deepen” “military and security trust” in Sino-Indian relations, if read with Dr Singh’s initiative for a “joint mechanism” to address an economic issue, can be seen to reflect an expansion of the concept of security in the bilateral domain. Already, India and China are negotiating a border settlement. They are also deeply engaged in regular economic dialogue. In a grand sweep, the totality of possible focus on military-related issues and economic concerns can, therefore, be described as potential agenda of full-scope security.

An insightful perception of this magnitude is easy to gain. For PRC, an intriguing *paradox* is that the Sino-Indian boundary dispute has remained unresolved for over half a century *despite* China’s undoubted triumph in the 1962 Himalayan War with India. For New Delhi, too, the enduring border dispute is surely not a satisfying outcome of the 1962 conflict. However, it will be illogical for either side to trifle with the current bilateral context of CBMs and civilised dialogue on the border dispute. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Dr Singh has now articulated an aspect of India’s economic security in regard to China’s harnessing of the *Brahmaputra*. From New Delhi’s standpoint, it is logical to have chosen the present climate of a generally peaceful Sino-Indian border to try and add an economic dimension to the goal of “mutual military and security trust”.

⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *On board media interaction with Prime Minister on March 28, 2013 on return from BRICS Summit*, <http://www.mea.gov.in>. Accessed on 30 March 2013

For China, on the other hand, the harnessing of *Yarlung Tsangpo*, which in its lower reaches flows through India's Arunachal Pradesh, is an issue, which in its economic dimension, cannot be easily linked to the basic border dispute. It must also be noted that Dr Singh has taken care to say that China's current activities across the *Brahmaputra*, being focused entirely on run-of-the-river projects, is not a cause for worry in the Indian circles that matter. However, his initiative is designed for a win-win outcome for both countries in this sphere in the future.

Conclusion: The Debatable US Factor

On a wider Asian and global canvas at the moment, China is widely acknowledged to be second only to the United States on many counts in the superpower scale. At the same time, the larger international community is aware that India is seeking to reposition itself as a rising power which is keen to compete and cooperate with China wherever and whenever possible. These difficult-to-measure attributes of India and China will in some ways determine the future course of their bilateral dialogues on a variety of issues.

Relevant to the future course of India-China engagement is a sweeping observation by Aaron Friedberg in his 2012 book on 'A Contest for Supremacy'. On the triangular US-India-China interactions, Friedberg writes: "... Because of the importance assigned by the [George W] Bush administration (January 2001 - January 2009) to building an Indo-US partnership, China was forced to play catch-up for most of its [Bush administration's] two terms in office. This put New Delhi in the enviable position of being able to improve its two most significant bilateral relationships simultaneously, and despite clear evidence of deepening strategic ties to Washington, it left open the possibility that India might continue to 'play the field', rather than drawing ever closer to the United States".⁷

Friedberg's observation is open to further debate. But the fact remains that India has acquired a position in recent years – regardless of whether, at any given time, this can be seen as *enviable position* – to engage China against the backdrop of a dynamic global matrix. Much will of course depend on New Delhi's statesmanship to capitalise on the perceived importance of India in the changing worldviews of both the US and China.

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⁷ Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, p. 205, paperback edition, W. W. Norton, New York, London, 2012