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Chinese Premier's Visits to India and Pakistan: Strategic Implications

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Abstract

This paper discusses the recent visits by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to India and Pakistan. Premier Wen spent three days in each country and held discussions on a wide range of issues. This paper focuses on the political and strategic issues, and makes some observations on what these visits reveal about the nature of Sino-Indian and Sino-Pak relations.

Introduction

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao made two back-to-back official visits to India and Pakistan from 15-17 December and 17-19 December 2010 respectively. In contrast to the India visit that was relatively low key in terms of expectations and deliverables, the Pakistan visit was marked by greater fanfare and resulted in more deliverables, signifying the close relations between the two countries. This paper considers the political and strategic objectives of Premier Wen's visits, and comments on some of the achievements and outcomes.

For China, the India visit was important to soothe the tensions that had recently erupted between them with respect to several issues, including the territorial dispute concerning Arunachal Pradesh; China's growing presence in Pakistan Administered Kashmir through its infrastructural assistance; and its hydroelectric projects, in particular the construction of a huge dam on its side of the Brahmaputra river which threatens to affect India's water supply.

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Economic realities and strategic considerations have also compelled China to develop closer ties with India. Both these countries are the emerging economic giants of the world, with China the second largest economy after the United States and India tipped to become the third largest economy by the middle of this century. Strategically, India's growing bonhomie with the United States and Japan, both of whom have differences with China, would have been a factor in the present timing of the visit. Premier Wen's trip to Pakistan, on the other hand, was a reinforcement of the special ties the two countries share with each other, and a reminder that despite China's engagement with India, Pakistan remains its special friend.

The Visit to India

There were several positives that resulted from the India visit. Economics and trade topped the agenda, with both countries agreeing to increase bilateral trade from the present US\$60 billion to US\$100 billion by 2015. Economic agreements worth US\$16 billion were signed between the two countries. More importantly, India's concerns on the water issue, in particular about China building a hydroelectric dam to divert water from its territories were also allayed by Premier Wen who said 'that all upstream development activities by China... will never harm downstream interests.'² However, despite these positive gains, India's prime security concerns on Kashmir, terrorism and the border were not addressed to India's satisfaction.

China's recent policy of giving stapled visas instead of the regular stamped visas for residents of Jammu and Kashmir on grounds that it is disputed territory has been a matter of great concern to India which regards Jammu and Kashmir as an integral part of its territory. During the visit, Premier Wen remained largely non-committal on the issue, suggesting further bilateral discussions to find a solution to the problem. India's displeasure is apparent in its pointed omission of the 'One China Policy' in the recent joint communiqué. India had earlier expressed the view that just as it was sensitive to China's concerns over the Tibet Autonomous Region and Taiwan, China should respect India's position on Jammu and Kashmir. This is also the first time that India allowed demonstrations by Tibetan protesters in the capital. This is seen in some quarters as a subtle message that if the Chinese do not recognise India's claim over Jammu and Kashmir, India may no longer be as forthcoming in its 'One China Policy'.

Terrorism remains another significant concern for India after the Mumbai attacks. The joint communiqué issued by the two countries denounced terrorism and both countries agreed to fight against it jointly, including dismantling networks that fund terrorism. Both countries

² 'Working Together for New Glories of the Oriental Civilization', Address by H.E Wen Jiabao, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China at the Indian Council of World Affairs (16 December 2010), www.icwa.in/pdfs/chinapm_lecture.pdf. Accessed on 17 December 2010.

committed themselves to implementing the UN resolutions, particularly UNSC 1267 which proscribes organisations such as the Jamaat-ud-Dawa and Lashkar-e-Taiba, largely believed to be behind the Mumbai attacks. China, however, refrained from making any specific reference to the Mumbai attacks or of India's concerns about terror outfits operating from Pakistani soil. This is natural given China's own interest in maintaining its close ties with Pakistan. Any expectation that India may have had of China using its special relationship with Pakistan to pressure it to bring the perpetrators of 26/11 to justice were belied.

The biggest issue between India and China involves longstanding boundary disputes, largely concerning an area of over 40,000 square kilometers around Aksai Chin in the western sector and over 90,000 square kilometers in the state of Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern sector. Premier Wen acknowledged that the border issue was a 'historical legacy' that was not 'easy to completely resolve.'³ Both sides agreed to set up a mechanism for consultation and coordination on border affairs and reiterated their commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes. However, short of promising to carry on with negotiations, no real advances were made on this issue. Similarly, while Premier Wen expressed support for India's 'aspiration to play a greater role in the United Nations, including in the Security Council'⁴, he did not give it the kind of full endorsement that had earlier been given by President Obama during his visit to India.

The Visit to Pakistan

By contrast, there was little ambiguity or coyness in China's affirmative statements during Premier Wen's visit to Pakistan. Pakistan and China share a warm symbiotic relationship; China is Pakistan's largest benefactor in the defence, nuclear technology and infrastructural development while Pakistan is China's gateway to West Asia and the Indian Ocean region. The visit provided both countries an opportunity to strengthen their 'all weather' friendship. 2011 was designated as the 'Year of China-Pakistan Friendship', coinciding with the 60th anniversary of Pakistan-China diplomatic ties.

As with the visit to India, economic cooperation was at the forefront of this visit. Both countries pledged to double their bilateral trade to US\$15 billion by 2015. This visit culminated in trade deals worth US\$ 35 billion dollars, including a series of agreements in

³ Shubhajit Roy, 'Boundary issue a historical legacy, will take long time to resolve: Wen', *Indian Express* (17 December 2010), www.indianexpress.com/story-print/725959. Accessed on 17 December 2010.

⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, India, *Joint Communique of the Republic of India and the Peoples Republic of China* (16 December 2010), www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=100016879&pid=1921. Accessed on 20 December 2010.

important sectors of energy, banking and transportation.⁵ The trade agreements are expected to breathe new life into Pakistan's economy, especially after the devastation caused by the floods earlier this year. During the visit, China reaffirmed its commitment to be actively involved in the post-flood reconstruction efforts,⁶ proving again that it is an all-weather friend.

Cooperation in infrastructure, energy and agriculture also figured prominently in the discussions during the visit. China is investing in closer transportation and infrastructural links with Pakistan and, amongst other things, has agreed to help upgrade the Karakoram Highway. Premier Wen also reaffirmed China's interest in developing Pakistan's energy sector by cooperation in conventional, renewable and civil nuclear energy.⁷

On the specific issue of terrorism, China acknowledged Pakistan's challenges and resolved jointly to fight the three forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism. It is no secret that China is battling extremist elements in its own backyard with separatists fighting for autonomy in the province of Xinjiang where there is a sizeable Muslim population. China has fears that the rise of religious militancy in Pakistan could spill over to Xinjiang. It is a sign of the close ties between these two countries that China did not press Pakistan on the issue of rising militancy and terrorism, and instead expressed its support and understanding for Pakistan's actions on fighting terrorism.

Conclusion

In so far as India's and Pakistan's strategic considerations are intermeshed with China, these visits suggest that Pakistan has more to smile about. While significant gains were made on the economic side for both India and Pakistan, on core security issues including the dispute over Kashmir and the Mumbai terrorist attacks, China's statements tended to favour Pakistan's position. This is not surprising as China and Pakistan clearly have greater strategic congruence; indeed India is a common factor in both countries' strategic considerations. It is apparent that the key driver in India-China relations is economics (these two economic giants have no choice but to deal with each other) whereas the strong friendship between China and Pakistan is based on a mutual need for – and trust in – the other.

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⁵ 'China PM vows to boost ties with Pakistan', *The Dawn* (19 December 2010), www.dawn.com/2010/12/19/terrorism-should-not-be-linked-to-any-nation-chinese-pm.html. Accessed on 21 December 2010.

⁶ 'All Weather Friendship', *China Daily* (19 December 2010), www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2010-12/18/content_11721611.htm. Accessed on 20 December 2010.

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, *Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan* (19 December 2010), www.mofa.gov.pk/Press_Releases/2010/Dec/PR_310.htm. Accessed 20 December 2010.