

ISAS Brief

No. 431 – 31 May 2016

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Defining the India-China Relationship:

A Continuing Quest

The latest state visit to China by India's President Pranab Mukherjee was not aimed at achieving a breakthrough on any of the issues between the two Asian neighbours. The main significance of this trip was to assess the relative importance of India and China to each other. Chinese President Xi Jinping wanted India to "merge" its Look East policy with his own Belt-and-Road Initiative, while President Mukherjee sought "new momentum" in the Sino-Indian engagement.

P S Suryanarayana¹

Diplomatic forays by constitutional heads of state rarely produce substantive outcomes. Despite this caveat, the state visit to China by India's President Pranab Mukherjee from 24 to 27 May 2016 was marked by substantive talks, although no breakthrough was attempted or achieved. His visit took place in a two-fold geopolitical setting. First, the Pakistani Army Chief had shown a renewed sense of urgency about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project during his visit to Beijing on 16 and 17 May. India has deep reservations about the route-map of this project. Secondly, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi will meet the

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 author, not ISAS, is liable for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

United States President Barack Obama yet again and address a joint session of the US Congress in Washington on 7 and 8 June. China, which has begun to compete with the US, still a superpower, on a wide range of issues, monitors the India-US Strategic Partnership very closely.

A host of India's concerns with reference to China had indeed come to the fore before Mukherjee set out on 24 May. Beijing had, according to New Delhi, obstructed its efforts at the United Nations to bring to justice a Pakistani national, Mohamad Masood Azhar, suspected of having masterminded terror attacks in India. At the strategic level, New Delhi reckoned that, by equating India with Pakistan for membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), Beijing was seeking to nullify the fact that the forum had already recognised India's nuclear non-proliferation credentials.

The highlight of the talks in Beijing was that Xi told Mukherjee that "Beijing would like to cooperate with India to merge India's 'Act East policy' with China's [Eurasian] 'Belt-and-Road [BAR] Initiative'"² – a network of connectivity and infrastructure projects. India is wary of China's grand strategy behind this BAR Initiative, under which the CPEC is an 'early-harvest' project. The corridor passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (Azad Jammu and Kashmir in Islamabad's terminology) as well as Northern Areas. New Delhi regards these territories as part of its territory. The old princely State of Jammu and Kashmir, which included these territories, had in fact merged with India at its Independence. Despite this, and by pressing ahead with the CPEC project, Xi has now left India in no doubt about his support for Pakistan's claims to these territories. Behind the diplomatic façade, sources, who cannot be identified by name or national affiliation, say that India's concerns about the Sino-Pakistani partnership will be taken seriously by the Chinese authorities only when they cease to have concerns about India's hospitality towards the Tibetan leader, Dalai Lama, and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile.

Given these complexities, Xi has now suggested that India think of "merging" its "Act East policy" with China's BAR Initiative. This translates into a call, in the first place, for progress on the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Corridor project along India's eastern flank. In contrast, the route-map of the CPEC project covers India's northern and western flanks.

² China's State Television, as monitored in Singapore on 26 May 2016.

However, India has still not taken a firm stand on Xi's BAR Initiative as a whole, given also the complexities of the US-China tussle over primacy in East Asia and the wider world.

On other aspects of Mukherjee's visit, "Xi urged both sides to deal with bilateral disputes [including the border issue] in appropriate ways".³ This implies a lack of fresh progress towards any dispute resolution at this stage. However, the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Hua Chunying, noted: "[T]he two sides agree to enhance cooperation on railways, industrial parks and new energy, galvanize and support friendly relations between more provinces and cities ... agree to strengthen cooperation on investment, trade and tourism, take more measures to expand bilateral trade and bolster a more balanced development of bilateral trade in a constructive manner".⁴ All these items, except tourism, indicate the scope for greater Chinese participation in India's economy, given the open-source data of China's annual economic growth rate of over US\$ 10 trillion, compared to India's at just US\$ 2 trillion. On the perceived Chinese obstructionism at the UN over New Delhi's efforts to track down Pakistan-based anti-India terrorists, Beijing gave no assurances, instead calling for bilateral and multilateral cooperation, including in the BRICS forum that consists of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

Concluding his visit, Mukherjee said: "We [India and China] agreed to engage in practical cooperation and identify possible areas for early harvests in sectors such as railways, industrial zones, smart cities, renewable energy, power, space, aviation, etc." He said he was returning to India with "the conviction that we must jointly impart new momentum to this defining partnership of the 21st century".⁵

Beijing sees this idea of a Sino-Indian "defining partnership of the 21st century" through the prism of potential India-US-Japan cooperation in the context of China's current rise. Significantly, John Garver, in his stupendous work, *China's Quest*, has written as follows: "India, unlike Japan, is not protected by alliance with the United States, and in a situation of looming "encirclement" Beijing might well target India as the weakest, most vulnerable link. New Delhi's strategy thus seems to be to use the threat of Indian alignment with the United States and Japan to induce Beijing to adopt more conciliatory policies toward India, especially on the territorial dispute. This is a tack that requires a tilt toward Washington and Tokyo

³ Ibid

⁴ http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1367358.shtml

⁵ <http://www.presidentofindia.gov.in/press-release-detail.htm?2239>

adequate to rouse Chinese apprehensions, but not so pronounced as to produce Chinese hostility and punitive measures”.⁶ Heady stuff of *realpolitik* that fits the latest context in which Xi is trying to assess whether India would at all “merge” its ‘Act East policy’ with his signature BAR Initiative – his dream of ‘global commons’ that radiate out of China.

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⁶ John W. Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China*, Oxford University Press, New York, United States of America, 2016, p. 756