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Sino-Indian Strategic Dialogue: Exploring Potential for Cooperation

While there is no denying the “friendly atmosphere” in which the first China-India Strategic Dialogue has taken place, the two sides have not bridged the gulf between their positions on a global nuclear order and a terrorism-free world order. The focus was on “potential bilateral cooperation” and the need for a “predictive” international situation.

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China remains increasingly focused on creating a Sino-centric international order or at least a Beijing-friendly global order. Surely, Beijing does not proclaim any such aspirational objective in vocal terms. But such a conclusion can be easily inferred from China’s connectivity plans and projects across the world. Indeed, this inference is also evident from India’s failure to convince China on the nuclear and terror issues during the first restructured Strategic Dialogue between these two Asian neighbours. The Dialogue took place in Beijing on 22 February 2017. Reading between the lines, certainly not beyond them, it is also possible to sense that India is beginning to see the contours of a *potential* Great Wall of a Sino-centric global order.

Strategic dialogues, by definition, are not designed to settle disputes and issues, for instance the China-India border dispute and the other differences between these two wary neighbours.

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The primary purpose of such dialogues is to facilitate a greater mutual understanding among the state-parties concerned. Unsurprisingly, therefore, this latest exercise in Beijing has produced no *concrete results*. It is a different debate altogether whether nation-states should at all engage in confidence-building dialogues with no specific problem-solving agendas. Viewed in this perspective, India may well have gained from this latest dialogue a greater glimpse of China's *preferences* on such issues as a global nuclear order and a terror-free world.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi received India's Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar before the start of the Strategic Dialogue. While this was not unusual, Wang Yi's counsel was noteworthy. He told Jaishankar that "China and India ... should further give play to the *potential of bilateral cooperation* to make greater contributions to the peace and development of the region and the world".² Outwardly, this is just a platitude. Now, compare this with what Jaishankar said after the Strategic Dialogue. Paraphrasing what India and China said to each other, he noted as follows: "(T)he feeling was that the international situation is in flux ... and at this time probably one thing that we could do together was a more stable, substantive, forward looking *India-China relationship which would inject a greater amount of predictability into the international system*".³ The detection of "flux" and the desire for "predictability" constitute a thinly-veiled code for the suspense over the kind of leadership that the United States, under President Donald Trump, might adopt, if at all, in sustaining or reshaping the existing global order.

Aspirational Competitiveness

The unbiased cannot miss the point made by China and India that there is still *potential* in their ongoing bilateral interactions for a qualitative contribution to the creation of a peaceful and predictable global order. Two caveats must be underscored, though. One, there is a surfeit of negative views in both China and India about each other. These are mostly in the form of freelance perceptions that are not necessarily founded on the ground realities of China-India state-to-state interactions. At the official level, the two sides are by and large aware of their respective national strengths and weaknesses. Two, the freelance sentiments, also known as

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1441752.shtml (Accessed on 28 February 2017). Authentic official English translation. Author is responsible for emphases throughout the paper.

³ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28089/Transcript+of+M...> (Accessed on 23 February 2017).

popular or public opinions, often tend to mask the sense of *aspirational competitiveness* that marks the official Sino-Indian engagement.

Both China and India want to improve their respective national strengths by benefiting from the existing or potentially new realities in the global commons ranging from the United Nations (UN) and the nuclear order to the worldwide domains of energy and the environment. Indeed China, with its widely-perceived lead over India in economic and geo-economic terms, does appear to desire a leadership role in crafting a new global order. This is evident from the Chinese President Xi Jinping's 'Belt and Road' projects of Asia-Europe connectivity for a start, as well as his successful launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. By contrast, India still seems to be in search of a niche role in the existing global order or a potentially new one. This is clear from New Delhi's Robert Bruce-like attempts to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council as well as a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

Among the many nuances of the global commons, two issues of particular interest to India at this stage figured in the Sino-Indian Strategic Dialogue on 22 February. These issues are India's elusive membership of the NSG, and the lack of consensus at a UN panel for imposing sanctions on Masood Azhar, a Pakistani national whom Delhi wants punished for terrorism. Without downplaying the global importance of these two issues, it can be discerned that India's destiny, going forward, is not entirely dependent on how these two questions are resolved. However, if India has made much of these two issues in its latest Strategic Dialogue with China, the reason can simply be traced to the world-views of these two countries in conceptualising a future global order.

A Tale of Two Issues

The NSG is a multi-state group that controls the global trade in all things nuclear and seeks to act as a conscience keeper for protecting the world from an Atomic Armageddon. In a similar vein in a different domain, the UN Sanctions Committee that deals with terrorism issues globally is also a multi-state group. In Beijing's view, India's quest for membership of the NSG as well as terror-related sanctions on Masood Azhar are multilateral issues which do not

inherently fall in the category of China-India bilateral relations.⁴ Although these two issues did figure in the Strategic Dialogue on 22 February, the outcome brought no cheer to India.

On the NSG membership issue, Delhi and Washington (under the previous Obama Administration) have already singled out China as the country holding up consensus on India's admission. With Beijing asserting that the NSG membership was not like a gift for the US to present to India, the latter countered by saying that it was not seeking a gift but only asserting its non-proliferation credentials to gain entry into this Group.⁵ As for Masood Azhar's case, Beijing has put a 'technical hold' on a final decision pending the evolution of 'consensus' that would be acceptable to China itself and its "all-weather strategic partner", Pakistan. Delhi's contention is that several countries, not just India, have sought sanctions on Masood Azhar, and that China should wake up to this reality in the interest of a terrorism-free world.⁶

While it is clear that India has so far failed to convince China on these two issues, Delhi's game-plan in keeping them alive is easy to discern. Almost eight-and-a-half years ago, the NSG had accepted India's non-proliferation credentials as a state with an independent nuclear arsenal and with no track record of directly or indirectly aiding other states and any non-state actor to develop or acquire atomic weapons. At the behest of the US, China had on that occasion acquiesced in the NSG's decision that favoured India; the reasons for Chinese action at that time fall outside the scope of this brief paper. China's argument now is that there should be universal, not a one-country-specific norms for NSG membership. In essence, therefore, there is an emerging, although unspoken, Sino-Indian competition to *conceptualise* a global nuclear order. It is the same story with the conceptualisation of a global terrorism-free order.

A pertinent question is whether a stated or unspoken competition in conceptualisation can also become a competition to *establish* a new global nuclear order and a terrorism-free order. A collateral poser is whether India has the comprehensive national strength to compete with China in this manner. It is fashionable in China, especially in non-official circles, to view India condescendingly or even dismissively, particularly its capabilities in the new domains of high-tech military matters as well as the outer space and the cyberspace. But it is elementary common sense that condescension and dismissiveness often conceal a sense of anxiety and

⁴ China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs clarified its position on some of India's concerns ahead of the first Sino-Indian Strategic Dialogue that took place on 22 February 2017. <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn>

⁵ An elemental Sino-Indian verbal exchange of this kind on Delhi's bid for NSG membership can be gleaned from the websites of Chinese Foreign Ministry and India's External Affairs Ministry.

⁶ Sino-Indian exchanges on the Masood Azhar issue, too, can be gleaned from the foreign ministry websites of these two countries.

concern. This does not, however, mean that India is in a position to match China's comprehensive national strength at present.

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