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New Dynamic in China-India Dialogue

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Abstract

The new Working Mechanism on border affairs, which India and China have now set up, is designed to ensure that their disputed boundary will be a zone of peace and tranquillity. A follow-up question is whether China and India can muster political will to resolve the basic border dispute itself. For now, the imperative of shared political will remains elusive. While China and India have demonstrated ‘Copenhagen Spirit’ on a global issue like climate change, the Pakistan factor has not disappeared from their bilateral atmosphere. In these circumstances, there are signs of India exploring neo-nonalignment with reference to China and the United States of America.

Introduction: A New Panel with Clear Mandate

By establishing a new “Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs”, the two mega-state Asian neighbours have now signalled a shared sense of urgency in addressing a contentious bilateral issue.

Article-I and Article-VI of the Agreement to set up this Working Mechanism, signed in New Delhi on 17 January 2012, spell out the primary mandate of this new panel. To carry out its unprecedented mandate, the Working Mechanism will consist of designated diplomatic and military officials of the two countries.

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Article-I empowers them to “deal with important border affairs related to maintaining peace and tranquillity in the India-China border areas”. More explicitly, Article-VI says the panel “will address issues and situations that may arise in the border areas that affect the maintenance of peace and tranquillity”. The designated officials “will [also] work actively towards maintaining the friendly atmosphere between the two countries”.

Article-III of the Agreement tasks the new panel to “study ways and means to conduct and strengthen exchanges and cooperation between military personnel and establishments of the two sides in the border areas”. This task is exclusively aimed at maintaining peace and tranquillity in the border areas.

In addition, Article-V slightly widens the scope of the panel’s mandate to cover the possibility of economic cooperation across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) along the disputed border. By stating that “the Working Mechanism will undertake other tasks that are mutually agreed upon by the two sides”, the new Agreement opens room for ensuring a climate of sustained peace for a free flow of border trade.

The conventional vision of normal inter-state cooperation across the LAC is heightened also by Article-IV. Somewhat emphatically it states that “the Working Mechanism will explore the possibility of cooperation in the border areas that are agreed upon by the two sides”.

All for Future Perfect!

The new China-India Agreement, signed by their top envoys Zhang Yan and Subrahmanyam Jaishankar respectively, is explicit on a substantive aspect and a procedural issue in the ongoing China-India dialogue. Under Article V of the Agreement, the new panel, led by senior officials of foreign ministries of China and India, “will not discuss resolution of the Boundary Question or affect the [nearly decade-old] Special Representatives Mechanism”.²

Interestingly, the agreement on this officially-labelled Working Mechanism, not to be confused with the older mechanism of Special Representatives, was signed on the occasion of the latest talks between these Representatives themselves. Noteworthy, therefore, is the fact that there is no provision for new players in the procedural domain of who will try and resolve the China-India border issue. The Special Representatives will continue to wrestle with the task of coming up with a border settlement.

In addition, there is no fresh development at this stage over the substantive aspect of resolving the border dispute itself. On balance, such a perspective, which will define the

² The full text of the Agreement can be accessed under Bilateral Documents (January 17, 2012) at India’s Ministry of External Affairs website: <http://www.mea.gov.in>

functioning of the new Working Mechanism, reflects the current state of affairs in the public domain.

Arguably, the China-India boundary question is the most complex bilateral dispute of its kind in today's international political milieu. So, there being no public sign of any new ground being broken in the substantive and procedural domains of resolving the China-India border issue, what really is the new relevance of the latest Working Mechanism?

Beyond the Past CBMs

While it is true that the core issue of a border settlement has not been addressed in the new Agreement, its true significance is derived from the existing ground reality across the LAC along the disputed boundary.

China and India had often expressed a sense of shared political will to maintain peace and tranquillity along the LAC as the prelude to an eventual border agreement. Noteworthy in this context are the bilateral Agreements of 1993 and 1996, both being confidence-building measures (CBMs) for peace along the LAC. However, the implementation of these CBMs has so far remained problematic because of the lack of mutual agreement on the exact path that the LAC takes along the inhospitable Himalayan landscape.

The latest Agreement is designed to address the unsatisfactory implementation of the earlier CBMs. From this, it is obvious that China and India have now demonstrated a shared sense of urgency to ensure the prevalence of peace and tranquillity along their disputed border. And, it is commonsensical that an ambience of sustainable peace and tranquillity will tone up the political atmospherics for serious parleys by the Special Representatives in their quest for the end-product of a border settlement.

It is certainly impossible to exaggerate the criticality of genuine peace and tranquillity along the contentious China-India Himalayan border. Arguably, therefore, a certain degree of political wisdom was the basis of the path-breaking border-related CBM which China and India entered into in the 1990s when Jiang Zemin and P V Narasimha Rao were at the helm. As already noted in this sub-context, this accord and the follow-up CBMs have not, however, prevented the periodic outbreak of allegations of LAC violations by both sides.

From this standpoint, these border-related CBMs have turned out to be an article of faith in the ideal of peace and tranquillity rather than a testament of practical purpose. The new Working Mechanism is now viewed by the two governments as a result-oriented instrument to achieve peace and tranquillity along the LAC on a sustainable basis: nothing more and nothing less.

The situation along the China-India border has, in recent times, come into sharp global focus because of periodic allegations of incursions by the army personnel of both sides across the admittedly blurred LAC.

As a result, the evident overarching peace along this Line during the past couple of decades, in the broadly defined sense of political climate unclouded by open warfare, has often gone unheralded but not unnoticed.

Experimental Pragmatism

Significantly, therefore, there is a method, best described as experimental pragmatism, in the charm offensives that the two sides now resorted to and set the stage for the latest accord. India's Special Representative Shivshankar Menon was the first to set the tone through a speech³ on 9 January 2012. Menon said "there is enough space" on the global stage "for both India and China to realise their development aspirations". This, he noted, was evident from the fact that "economics and development are not zero-sum games".

More relevant, in his view, was the reality that India and China "are already integrated with each other to an unprecedented extent" as cooperative partners in the trade and economic spheres.

On the argument that "India and China are bound to be strategic adversaries" despite their "cooperative elements in economic relations and approach to international issues", he dismissed such "determinism" as "misplaced". It "ignores the successful experience and demonstrated expertise of both governments in managing differences and building commonalities ... particularly since [India's Prime Minister] Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in 1988". Therefore, he argued, "the issue is whether we can continue to manage the elements of competition within an agreed strategic framework which permits both of us to pursue our core interests".

Acknowledging, in this overall context, that "the boundary question remains unresolved", Menon said, "we are in the second stage of the three-stage process of agreeing [on political] principles, a framework, and finally a boundary line". So, he reasoned, "the robustness of our bilateral relation will depend on dialogue and communication", not just between the two governments but among all stakeholders including businesses, scholars, and media on both sides.

³ Speech by NSA [National Security Adviser] on "Developments in India-China Relations": Full text can be accessed under Speeches/Statements (January 09, 2012) at India's Ministry of External Affairs website: <http://www.mea.gov.in>.

India's relatively rare charm offensive of this kind was amply reciprocated by China in its characteristically forthright fashion. In fact, it is learnt on good authority that it was China's move or initiative which resulted in the establishment of the latest Working Mechanism. Emphasising "China's tremendous sentiment of friendship towards India", China's Special Representative Dai Bingguo noted, on 16 January 2012, as follows: "There does not exist such a thing as China's attempt to 'attack India' or 'suppress India's development'. ... We need to view each other's development in a positive light and regard each other as major partners and friends, not rivals. ... What we face is a golden period to grow China-India relations. The world has enough space for China and India to achieve common development, as there are so many areas for us to work together".⁴

Such elemental logic can easily explain the political basis of the new Working Mechanism. However, a follow-up question is whether China and India can muster the required political will and act in concert to go beyond their new symphony of positive sentiments and resolve the basic border dispute itself. Now, only the reckless can offer a quick one-word answer, one way or another, especially with reference to a timeline or countdown for a solution. At the same time, it will be inadvisable to dismiss the latest development as a non-event.

Glacial Pace of Border Parleys

Surely, the latest wave of China-India reciprocal pragmatism, evident in the run-up to the new China-India accord, does little to hasten the glacially slow pace of formal negotiations on the central issue of a border settlement itself. For now, the two sides are still in the process of trying to evolve a "framework" for settlement. It is understood that a framework, if and when agreed upon in the future, will indeed be the same as the so-far-elusive border settlement itself. An agreed framework will then have to be translated into a cartographic nicety on paper and along the difficult Himalayan terrain.

For the present, though, the latest reciprocal pragmatism has facilitated a meaningful understanding on a politically important procedural issue. Dai and Menon, who met in New Delhi on 17 January 2012 for the 15th round of talks at the level of Special Representatives, decided to compile an agreed record of the actual boundary negotiations held since 2003. The transparent objective is to lock in and build upon whatever progress had been achieved in those tricky negotiations. This is considered important for another reason too: the need to consolidate the progress made since 2003, especially in the context of Dai's expected exit from the centre-stage in China in the near future.

⁴ The full text of comments by Dai Bingguo, State Councillor of the People's Republic of China (on 2012/01/16) was accessed at China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: <http://www.mfa.gov.cn>. His comments are titled: A Brighter Future When China and India Work Hand in Hand.

At the bottom line, the mutual wariness of China and India towards each other, in the unfolding context of their rise on the global stage along different trajectories, cannot be explained entirely by the traditional paradigm of bilateral rivalry. The other factors relate to the historical and current power plays in the shared neighbourhood of India's and China's. Overarching these regional realities is the emerging dynamics of the open and subtle gamesmanship between the United States and China for primacy in the Indo-Pacific zone.

China-India Political Will is the Elusive Answer

For the wider international community, the ongoing and elaborate process towards a possible India-China rapprochement may seem to reflect a surprising lack of time-sensitivity on their part. However, there is no puzzle to look for as the explanation for this state of affairs.

The successful military campaign by China against India in 1962 and their subsequent tactical and strategic moves against and towards each other point to a central reality which is at stake into the future: the need for shared political will.

Given that the China-India border is of far less strategic salience to them in the current space age than at any time in the past, it is possible to argue that their continuing stand-off is a political issue as much as it is a military matter. Now, while China, already a fully-risen power in many fields, seeks its own tryst with destiny as an eventual global superpower, it cannot afford to be really soft or appear to be soft on this border issue. For China, its real or perceived softness will be bad politics on the global stage. At the other end of the China-India spectrum, New Delhi is acutely aware of its continuing second-best position (euphemistically speaking). As a result, India also wants to avoid what might be interpreted as concessions or soft politics in any final settlement with China.

India and China will have to break this logjam if they want to move towards the elusive answer of shared political will to settle their border issue. They can do so by moving away from the politics of their 1962 confrontation as also by reinforcing their recent display of 'Copenhagen Spirit'⁵ and extending it to some other areas of global concern and of China-India common interest. It was at the global climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009 that India and China made common cause in championing the inalienable rights of the developing countries in this future-sensitive Planet Earth issue.

One way of looking at the logic of the 1962 conflict between China and India is to ponder over the rather transparent political objectives that the then Chinese leader Mao Zedong had set for himself. Arguably, Mao wanted to prove that the then Chinese political system and his own tactical and strategic acumen were superior to India's democracy and the then Indian

⁵ The expression refers to the cooperative manner in which China and India coordinated their positions at the United Nations climate summit held in the Danish capital in 2009.

leader Jawaharlal Nehru's political capabilities respectively. Not only that. Mao's 1962 military campaign against India was also aimed at testing or exposing America's attitude towards Nehru and the then Soviet Union's burgeoning ties with India.

In the event, Mao's China won a decisive round over Nehru's India on the battlefield. Yet, as a matter of history, the 1962 episode did not lead to a situation in which the two countries might have had to re-order their ties, especially after the exit of Nehru and Mao, on the sole basis of a permanent victor-vanquished paradigm. It is evident that China does not always feel compelled to look back on 1962 with a sense of triumphalism. To this extent, and especially in recent times, Beijing does not tend to look down on India as the loser in their only bilateral trial of military strength.

At the other end of the spectrum, a now-rising India, despite the drag of huge poverty at home, does not always look upon this particular military episode of 1962 as the sole point of reference. On that occasion, New Delhi's lack of military preparedness was utterly exposed, and it is true that India has moved ahead in the military domain as well since then. On balance, however, it is but natural that the ongoing China-India border negotiations cannot be completely divorced from the reality of the 1962 victor-vanquished paradigm.

'Copenhagen Spirit' and the Pakistan Factor

Going forward, it is no less evident that there is sufficient political space for civilised dialogue within the China-India spectrum. A positive episode in this look-to-the-future scenario relates to the China-India 'Copenhagen Spirit'.

In recent years, China and India have often been on the same wavelength on the global issues of climate change, macro-level maritime security as distinct from sovereign naval competition, and national energy security in generic terms.

In a sense, some positive momentum has been generated by the sheer political logic of the commonsensical theory that China's skyrocketing ascendance and India's relatively slow rise are indeed compatible. It is possible to argue that mutual nuclear deterrence, since the 1998 atomic arms testing by New Delhi, has been one of the stabilising factors on the China-India front. China tested its first nuclear weapon as far back as in 1964. Now, this argument about nuclear deterrence as a bilateral stabiliser of sorts is of course just that: an argument. There are many other nuances in the worldwide debate on whether nuclear deterrence is a confidence-builder for peace among the nations with atomic arsenals or, in contrast, a confidence-buster.

Significant in the China-India context is the fact that both countries officially swear by the principle of no-first-use of nuclear weapons. In addition, both Beijing and New Delhi, as

space-faring players, have often advocated the non-militarisation of the outer space, which is seen as global commons.

These political snippets are of some relevance to the China-India engagement, if only because India's nuclear weapon testing in 1998 proved critical to their bilateral relationship. The context was the constant Pakistan factor in the China-India relationship. Rarely, if at all, New Delhi toys with the idea that Beijing might scale down its enthusiasm for propping up Pakistan against India.

The Nuclear Dimension

In the mid-1990s, before India tested atomic arms, the then Chinese leader, Jiang Zemin, suggested to Pakistan that it consider shelving contentious issues in its relations with India and focus instead on doable aspects of cooperation. It required no clairvoyance to see that Pakistan's dispute with India over Jammu and Kashmir was (and remains to this day) the primary contentious issue in Islamabad's ties with New Delhi. By and large, Jiang's proposal was quickly viewed in New Delhi as possibly a sign of China's potential goodwill towards India. At that time, Beijing's calculations were largely governed by its perception that a peaceful external neighbourhood was essential for China's internal economic growth at a phenomenally rapid pace.

All this changed, however, when India tested nuclear weapons in 1998. New Delhi soon began sensing China's waning interest in pressing Pakistan to shelve contentious issues in its relations with India and focus instead on developing friendly ties with it. The reason was too transparent to be missed. From Beijing's standpoint, the newly nuclear-armed India could be a complicating factor in China's external neighbourhood, despite Pakistan also going nuclear. Almost a decade later, China was not at all amused at the way the United States of America (US) virtually took the Indians under its wings by securing for New Delhi a much-coveted exemption from the strict guidelines of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. All these developments are well chronicled in contemporary diplomacy.

To all intents and purposes at present, China's general preference for a Kashmir settlement through India-Pakistan dialogue – a position largely traceable to Jiang's perspective on South Asia – is not unacceptable to India. However, Official India continues to be wary of China's perceivably heightened political and strategic interests in today's Pakistan, in spite of or even because of its current instability or at least unstable equilibrium.

Conclusion: Signs of Neo-Nonalignment⁶

Given the totality of China-India relationship, defined increasingly by civilised dialogue on admittedly difficult issues, a new strategic reality, in a broad generic sense, is beginning to take shape. Beijing and New Delhi have, in their engagement, begun adhering to the same basic principle which Jiang had suggested to Pakistan for its relationship with India. The principle, in essence, is one of focussing on the doable at first.

This does not mean that China and India have given up their search for a boundary settlement. But they have brought to the table much candid and civilised dialogue at the official political levels and in the public domain. There is, however, hardly any suggestion from either country that the other side give up its strategic preparedness in any sense of this term.

It is in this overall ambience that India is beginning to think in terms of adopting a strategy which can best be described as neo-nonalignment. It is clear at this stage that India does not want to favour either the US or China in the event of an eventual confrontation, if not also an open conflict, between them.

From New Delhi's standpoint, a degree of nonalignment, with reference to the US and China, is increasingly becoming a possible and perhaps even attractive option. This is evident from the insiders' views which this writer has elicited.

At the same time, India is fully aware of the possible advantages of being on the right side of the US and some of its allies like Japan or South Korea on security issues. Balancing this, India is no less keen to capitalise on China's growing economic profile. This should explain the graphic upturn in the India-China trade and economic relations in recent years. In dramatic language, India can strike a posture of pro-US tilt of some kind in the security domain and a pro-China tilt of another kind in the economic realm.

In essence and even without reference to the scenario of a post-American world, these elements of India's policy towards China, in today's context of the US' role in the Indo-Pacific region, constitute signs of possible neo-nonalignment.

Several other Asian countries, too, are increasingly looking for greater economic benefits from good ties with Beijing without, at the same time, losing sight of a possible security dividend from close relations with the US. However, India, given its historical experience of practising nonalignment with reference to the US and the Soviet Union, is now better positioned than most to chart a path of neo-nonalignment. Indeed, India can, in its Look East

⁶ This phrase and the arguments in this article flow from the author's conversations with Indian and Chinese officials over a period of time. The author and not the representatives of these countries are responsible for this analysis.

policy, consider having closer security ties with the US and a more extensive economic engagement with China than at present.

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