

# ISAS Insights

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## China-India Talks: Some Signals to Pakistan

*For China, its on-going multi-dimensional dialogue with India is not a pastime but a serious business of foreign policy, thereby necessitating close Chinese attention towards India's concerns which include its complaints against Pakistan. This became evident during the meeting between India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Goa on 15 October 2016, as can be gleaned from the official interpretations by the two sides. A litmus test of China's attitude, not just attention, towards India in this regard is yet to come.*

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In the shadow of a raging crisis along and across the Pakistan-India Line of Control (LOC) in Jammu and Kashmir, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping, no strangers to each other, conferred in Goa (India) on 15 October 2016. This meeting must be viewed in the context of the elementary knowledge in global diplomacy that China and Pakistan regard each other as an all-weather strategic partner. Because of the Sino-Pakistani bonhomie and the latest Pakistan-India crisis, these talks between Xi and Modi, on the margins of the Eighth BRICS<sup>2</sup> Summit the Indian leader was hosting, gained unusual importance.

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<sup>2</sup> BRICS is an inter-continental group consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Although these five countries differ from each other in economic and military strengths, this collective forum is generally seen as a potential geostrategic force in global affairs.

There is no discernible hard evidence to prove that the Sino-Indian mid-October meeting defused or scaled down the current Pakistan-India crisis. However, in the first week after this meeting, a “tactical” military exercise – a *signal* of political cooperation between India and Pakistan’s all-weather partner – has taken place along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the disputed Sino-Indian border region. The exercise was held on 19 October in the general area of India’s Chushul Garrison in Eastern Ladakh. Ladakh is an integral part of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), which holds a special constitutional status as a sub-national State in India. The India-Pakistan LOC, on the other hand, slices through the western side of J&K.

Announcing the success of this Sino-Indian “tactical” exercise, India’s Defence Ministry emphasised that the drills, involving also the Chinese troops from Moldo Garrison, were held in pursuance of the bilateral Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) of 2013.<sup>3</sup> Being the second joint exercise under the banner of “Sino-Indian Cooperation 2016” in the BDCA framework, the latest drills featured a Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief (HADR) operation in a fictitious scenario of an earthquake striking an Indian border village at those inhospitable Himalayan heights. Surely, these exercises in the name and style of “Sino-Indian Cooperation 2016” are designed to “enhance interaction” at the local level of soldiers, rather than interoperability of a higher military-strategic kind. However, as the Indian Defence Ministry has highlighted, the HADR drills “complement the Hand in Hand series of the India-China joint exercises”. Above all, the aim is to “maintain peace and tranquillity along the border areas of India and China”.<sup>4</sup>

The BDCA of 2013 is the *sixth* and latest confidence-building measure aimed at maintaining peace and tranquillity along the LAC in the disputed China-India border region. The earlier documents in this genre, with varying nomenclatures, were agreed upon in 1993, 1996, 2003, 2005, and 2012. All of these, except those in 2003 and 2005, have a direct bearing on the military dispositions of the two sides along the LAC. The political consensus in 2003 covered the appointment of Special Representatives by the two countries to negotiate a border settlement from an agreed political-strategic perspective. Coinciding with that agreement, India recognised the Tibet Autonomous Region (distinct from a larger Tibet) as a part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China (different from historical China). As a follow-up, the two

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<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Defence, Government of India, Press Release on 19 October 2016, <http://www.mod.gov.in>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

sides signed a protocol in 2005, outlining and amplifying the political parameters and guiding principles for the eventual settlement of the China-India border question.

## **Focus on the Trail of Terrorism**

With this background, the relevant point to note is that the latest Xi-Modi meeting in mid-October 2016, as well as the follow-up Sino-Indian “tactical” and cooperative military exercise, *contrast* sharply with the current Pakistan-India tensions. The contrast is *not* diminished by the fact that both these Sino-Indian talks and military drills, cited here, were *not* decided upon because of the current Pakistan-India tensions. In this political milieu itself, it is equally important to note that Pakistan figured in one way or other in the latest Xi-Modi meeting. But the two leaders have not arrived at any perceptible common ground in regard to Pakistan.

Indeed, no Sino-Indian accord, or even a specific consensus, which might directly impinge on the India-Pakistan relations, going forward, has been announced following the Xi-Modi mid-October meeting. However, the political drift of the Xi-Modi talks, as officially outlined by the two sides, shows that terrorism, the primary irritant that India traces to Pakistan in their current crisis, was discussed in a manner that did not disappoint Modi.

In a media briefing on 18 October 2016, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said: “The two leaders [Xi and Modi] agreed to conduct regular strategic communication on major issues, constantly elevate the level of exchanges and cooperation and properly control and handle specific differences.”<sup>5</sup> Surely, Wang Yi did not explicitly specify India’s concerns regarding terrorism emanating from Pakistan as one of the “major issues” that Xi and Modi agreed upon for “regular [Sino-Indian] strategic communication”. However, independent remarks by the Chinese and Indian spokespersons show that Xi and Modi have indeed agreed that the two sides should continue to talk about India’s concerns regarding terrorism emanating from Pakistan.

Asked about Modi’s view that “Pakistan supports anti-India terrorist groups”, the Chinese Spokeswoman Hua Chunying said as follows on 17 October 2016: “We [the Chinese] are strongly against terrorism of all forms, maintaining that terrorism should not be linked to [one]

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<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/XJPDJPZMJLGJXGSFWBCXZYDGAJXDJZGJLDRDBCHW/t1407054.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/XJPDJPZMJLGJXGSFWBCXZYDGAJXDJZGJLDRDBCHW/t1407054.shtml) (The file details are cited as they existed at the time of access.)

certain country [Pakistan], ethnic group and religion. ... The BRICS Summit adopted the Goa Declaration which ... incorporates anti-terrorism contents and represents the position of BRICS countries including China. Both India and Pakistan are China's friendly neighbours. China sincerely hopes that India and Pakistan can peacefully resolve relevant issues through dialogue and consultation".<sup>6</sup> More importantly, the same Chinese Spokeswoman, when asked about Modi's reported characterisation of Pakistan as the "mother-ship of terrorists" during one of the BRICS-related meetings, remarked: "Both India and Pakistan are victims of terrorism. The international community should respect the enormous efforts and sacrifices made by Pakistan in fighting terrorism." *Prima facie*, these Chinese comments do not endorse India's charge that Pakistan fosters and unleashes anti-India terrorism. However, it is indeed meaningful that China has *not* shied away from seeing India as a "victim of terrorism" in the specific context of a question concerning Modi's view of Pakistan as the "mother-ship" of terrorism.

These inconclusive nuances from the Chinese side gain some traction in the context of the Indian Spokesman Vikas Swarup's extensive briefing on the Modi-Xi mid-October talks. The two leaders referred to the Sino-Indian counter-terrorism dialogue that was held before this BRICS summit, Vikas Swarup said, emphasising that "both sides recognised terrorism as a key issue". Quoting Xi as having told Modi that "we should strengthen our security dialogue and our partnership", the Indian Spokesman pointed out that India identified itself, China, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh as victims of terrorism.

## **A Definitive Message**

Moreover, Modi was quoted as conveying a definitive message to Xi on the following lines: "Today, no country is immune from terrorism. Hence this is an issue on which we [India and China] cannot afford to have any differences. In particular, India and China must increase their coordination in the context of the UN 1267 Committee and look for common ground".<sup>7</sup> The United Nations (UN) 1267 Committee is mandated to implement the UN Security Council's

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, [www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/t1406504.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1406504.shtml) (The file details are cited as they existed at the time of access on 18 October 2016).

<sup>7</sup> A Video-Briefing on the Xi-Modi talks by India's Spokesman Vikas Swarup in New Delhi on 15 October 2016, as monitored by this author in Singapore on the same day.

Resolution 1267. This Resolution is widely regarded as the global community's anti-terror Magna Charta.

New Delhi feels frustrated that China is blocking India's efforts, in this Committee, to secure the censure of, and perhaps also some sanctions on, Pakistan for harbouring and unleashing anti-India terrorists. While Pakistan does not accept India's complaints in this regard, China remains unwilling to part ways with its all-weather partner on this issue. Therefore, it is significant, if not intriguing, that the Chinese state-run television network relayed the Indian Spokesman's version of Modi's mid-October message to Xi that "we [India and China] cannot afford to have differences" over the issue of terrorism.<sup>8</sup>

There is a collateral reason, too, for Xi's willingness to pay attention to Modi's views about anti-India terrorism emanating from Pakistan. Russia's President Vladimir Putin, concerned for long over 'Islamist terrorism' that has affected his country, was as focused as Modi on this issue at the BRICS-related meetings in Goa. Russia is China's very close strategic partner in the current international situation. Unsurprisingly, therefore, and as outlined by Vikas Swarup, Xi told Modi that "India and China must step up their counter-terrorism effort [and] we must maintain our [Sino-Indian] strategic communication and dialogue on this subject". This Indian version is in sync with the Chinese Foreign Minister's disclosure that Xi and Modi "agreed to conduct regular strategic communication on major issues" (cited above).

From India's perspective, this was perhaps the farthest that Xi could go while continuing to extend to Pakistan a significant diplomatic cover on the issue of anti-India terrorism. India's Spokesman noted that there was now a "continuous dialogue with China on counter-terrorism [and India's] expectation and hope is: China will see the logic of what we [the Indian authorities] are saying [about Pakistan]".<sup>9</sup>

On the stand of the collective BRICS forum, including China, on this issue, Vikas Swarup highlighted the following points: "The BRICS leaders ... called, for the first time, upon all States to prevent terrorist actions from their territories. ... For the first time, BRICS leaders called for effective implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions on counter-terrorism. They also called for increasing [the] effectiveness of UN counter-terrorism framework. They called upon all States to counter terrorism, radicalization, recruitment [of terrorists], terrorist

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<sup>8</sup> English-language channel of the Chinese state-run television network, as monitored by this author in Singapore on 15 October 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Same source as in Note 7

movements, [besides] dismantling of terrorist bases, [as well as ending] money laundering and drug-trafficking [both of these for terrorist activities]. They called for expedited adoption of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism, i.e. CCIT, which as you know, India has been championing since 1996”.<sup>10</sup>

The primary thrust of New Delhi’s diplomacy – during Modi’s talks with Xi, and Modi’s participation in the BRICS summit as well as the BRICS’ outreach summit with the leaders of the Bay-of-Bengal-Rim countries – was to highlight India’s concerns over terrorism emanating from Pakistan. Viewed broadly, India has succeeded in this endeavour, partly because Russia, too, was keen on counter-terror issues.

For China, its on-going multi-dimensional dialogue with India is not a pastime, but a serious business of foreign policy, thereby necessitating close attention towards India, the host of this BRICS summit, on the anti-terror issue as well, at least at this time. China will host the next BRICS summit in September next year. It is in the realm of scenarios that China could then choose to hold a BRICS’ outreach summit in a manner that might entail participation by Pakistan as well. If that happens in September 2017, there might well be a litmus test of the current BRICS’ anti-terror consensus, if the India-Pakistan tussle over this issue is not resolved by then.

Closely related to India’s current campaign against Pakistan on the terrorism issue is Islamabad’s intensified effort to portray India as a persistent violator of the human rights of Muslims in India’s Jammu and Kashmir. Islamabad’s campaign of this kind flows from the fact that Pakistan does not recognise Jammu and Kashmir, home to not only Muslims but also Hindus and Buddhists, as an integral part of India.

Significantly, a Resolution adopted at the 43rd session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Council of Foreign Ministers, at its meeting held in Tashkent on 18 and 19 October 2016, called upon the international community to “break its deadly silence”<sup>11</sup> over the current human rights situation in Jammu and Kashmir. The OIC, where Pakistan is a leading member, has in this fashion noted a ground reality of international “silence”. Importantly, this is not the first time that Pakistan has sought to campaign against India on such an issue. In

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<sup>10</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, [http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/27521/Transcript\\_of\\_Weekly\\_Media\\_Briefing\\_by\\_Official\\_Spokesperson\\_October\\_20\\_2016](http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/27521/Transcript_of_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_Official_Spokesperson_October_20_2016) (The file details are cited as they existed at the time of access.)

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=NDQwOA,,> (The file details are cited as they existed at the time of access.)

1994, Pakistan gave up its planned move for a vote on India, in the United Nations Human Rights Commission, after China and Iran counselled Islamabad to not press for such a vote.<sup>12</sup>

Now, in 2016, with Xi maintaining that “China will continue to be the participant, promoter and leader in global governance reform process”,<sup>13</sup> it remains to be seen how Beijing might want the world to promote the human-rights-and-anti-terror agendas. Beijing is sensitive to any internal or international politicization of “human rights” issues of direct concern to China itself. In a different campaign which also impinges on the international community, India has been saying that terrorism itself is the worst form of human rights violation.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> On the eve of Islamabad’s planned move for a vote on India, in the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva in 1994, this author, then a Special Correspondent of *The Hindu* in Pakistan, broke the news-story about the likelihood of China and Iran intervening in favour of India and stopping Pakistan in its tracks in that international forum.

<sup>13</sup> Same source as in Note 5

<sup>14</sup> A recurring comment by India’s Spokesperson, as can be gleaned from the website of India’s External Affairs Ministry, is that terrorism is the worst form of human rights violation.