

ISAS Special Report

No. 08 – 22 Nov 2012

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassec@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



A Stirring Call for China-India Strategic Leadership¹

P S Suryanarayana²

A resonant call for “strategic leadership” by China and India has been voiced by Singapore’s Emeritus Senior Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, at the eighth annual conference of the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) in Singapore on 22 November 2012. The theme of the conference is: India-China Cooperation for Global Good.

In his keynote address, Mr Goh urged these two rising Asian powers to exercise “strategic leadership”, comprehensively conceived, to take their bilateral relations forward. Similar leadership was advocated for addressing global concerns over a diverse array of political, economic, and military-related issues. Striking a realistic note while envisioning the possible global order in the “foreseeable” future, he also emphasised the “paramount importance” of the “triangular relationship” among the United States, China, and India.

Mr Goh exuded statesmanship as he explored the current state of China-India engagement in the specific context of East Asia and of the various theories about how the US might wish to remain the superpower of destiny (not his words) in the global order. Mr Goh said:

¹ This is a thematic report on the keynote address by Singapore’s Emeritus Senior Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, at the Eighth Annual Conference of the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. Mr Goh delivered the address on 22 November 2012.

² Mr P S Suryanarayana is Editor (Current Affairs) at ISAS. He can be contacted at isasps@nus.edu.sg. The trend line of presentation in this paper is that of the author and does not necessarily reflect the views of ISAS.

“Personally, I would be very surprised if a big country like India allowed itself to be used by the US to contain China. The US knows that it is not feasible to contain China’s rise. India knows that too and, in fact, aspires to rise. India will act according to its own interests, and on some issues, for example climate change, India’s interests will dovetail with China’s, not the US’ ”.

The Singapore statesman was emphatic in his belief that “competition between rising powers [like China and India] is unavoidable; conflict is not”. Tempering this belief with a strong sense of the *realpolitik*, he noted that neither India nor China would want to “cede any strategic advantage to the other”. Stressing further that “they will ‘keep the powder dry’ for all eventualities”, he appreciated the sense of pragmatism that both these countries were now displaying. “We should give due credit to China and India for having co-existed peacefully, while trying to bridge their differences over the last few decades. Today, a war across the land border [along the Himalayas] is much less likely compared to 50 years ago [when a border war erupted between China and India]”. At the same time, he said, “there will be occasional blips for sure”. On balance, the “determinism” in China-India adversarial relationship, as evident in a future-imperfect scenario, “is misplaced”.

A China-India Tryst with Destiny

Virtually envisioning a China-India tryst with destiny (not Mr Goh’s words), in terms of a peaceful and cooperative future between the two Asian mega-states, Singapore’s Emeritus Senior Minister said: “I am inclined to believe that China and India would want to focus on economic growth to lift the living standards of their peoples, rather than pursue external forays which will distract them from this goal. ... China and India’s [economic] transformation is still very much work in progress. In that sense, their best years are still ahead of them. ... This is not to say that China and India will rise and rise without interruption. They face considerable domestic challenges. ... I am nonetheless confident that both countries will continue with their economic reforms – not dramatically but steadily”.

On how the simultaneous rise of both India and China is now being viewed by their neighbours and the wider world, he said “the most obvious risk is that as they [China and India] continue to forge ahead, the rivalry between the two giants could intensify. Both countries are nuclear weapon states that are rapidly modernising their armies and air forces. Both are also building up blue water naval fleets”.

While shining the spotlight on both the grey and bright sides of the complex evolution of China-India relations since their 1962 border war, Mr Goh did not at all swerve from his central theme: the narrative of possibly pragmatic and peaceful coexistence between these two neighbourly Asian powers, especially if they could exercise “strategic leadership” in

their own engagement with each other and in their efforts to shape the global order going forward.

Expounding the domestic dimensions of the “strategic leadership” expected of both these countries, Singapore’s Emeritus Senior Minister said: “A new generation is assuming the mantle of leadership in Beijing and New Delhi. Last week, China underwent a once-in-a-decade leadership transition. ... All eyes will be on who will lead India following the next general elections in 2014, if not earlier. Expectations are for a leader from the younger generation to do so”.

Confident that the leaders in both these countries “are rational” in this context, he said “neither side [China or India] wants war, nor to be forced into it, because war will set back development and bring their peoples more harm than good. The next generation of leaders in Beijing and New Delhi ... will have to devise a *modus vivendi* to deal with the new and complicated problems that will inevitably arise”.

Peaceful Coexistence as *Modus Vivendi*

Portraying the need for such *modus vivendi* in stark strategic terms, Mr Goh said: “The reality is that in today’s world, China and India cannot afford to be isolationist or unilateralist. Neither is yet a superpower. For the foreseeable future, the US will remain as the only superpower. Even if China or India were to become a superpower one day, they would need to collaborate with other countries to solve global problems”.

It was in this grand vision that China and India could possibly coexist as cooperative Asian neighbours and also contribute to the global good that Mr Goh brought the US into a formula of world order based on statesmanship. His world view, with specific focus on East Asia, is: “The triangular relationship between the US, China and India is ... of paramount importance to our region. All parties want to be friends, not enemies. Some observers have warned that China could be uneasy with the current upswing in US-India relations, and that India may be part of a so-called US strategy to ‘contain’ or ‘encircle’ China. Any rhetoric of ‘containment’ is, in my opinion, misleading, untenable and even dangerous as it fuels mutual suspicion between big powers. It does not reflect the complexities of the world that we live or operate in, or how leaders and governments see things”.

A Whole-of-the-World Perspective

In this whole-of-the-world or globalised perspective, Mr Goh emphasised that the competition between China and India in the economic, political, and military-related strategic

domains “is not a race with a finishing line”. India, in his view, “will find its own way to keep pace with China.”

Drawing a decisive conclusion from such a comprehensive reality check, Mr Goh called for “a close and enduring partnership between China and India” at one level, and at another echelon, between these two countries on one side and other major players on the other. The US, Japan, Europe, and Russia were cited among the other major global players. Such a matrix of partnerships “is the best guarantee for global stability” into the distant future, he emphasised.

Within this framework of the future, “China and India must be an integral part of the broader collective efforts to ensure global security and manage the international economy”, Mr Goh advocated.

.....