

India-China Relations: Towards a New Type of Major Power Relationship

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Abstract

India and China are two ancient civilisations with a long history of engagements. They are the two most rapidly emerging powers of the world and are both undergoing economic transformations on an exceptional scale and speed. The relations between India and China have often been marked by cooperation, conflict, and competition. The past decades witnessed that the tensions between the duo increase over the disputed borders and the geopolitical rivalry for power, influence, resources, and markets. However, from Nehru to Manmohan era, it has been seen that regardless of the unresolved differences and border disputes the potential gains in the India-China relations are more substantial than the costs. This is the reason why the two countries are eager to advance their relations to a new level. The recent endeavors of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to deepen engagements with China are also no different, but the approach and style are a step ahead from his predecessors. A number of new initiatives have been undertaken by the Modi government to foster the relationship. These initiatives are seen as the beginning of a new chapter in India-China relations by the several scholars and policy-makers. In the context of the changing dynamics of relations between India and China, this paper presents a historical overview of the relationship as well as the analysis of the new initiatives taken by the Modi government. The paper also makes an attempt to investigate the prospects of a 'new type of major power relationship' between India and China.

Keywords: India, China, Emerging powers, Narendra Modi, New type of major power relationship.

Introduction

The twenty-first century is already witnessing the rise of China and India to global prominence. There is a general expectation that these two countries would be among those that shape the geopolitics of the rest of the century (National Intelligence Council 2004). However, there are several speculations about the dynamics, direction, and development of the relationship between these two Asian giants.

The history shows that India-China relations were sometimes amicable and sometimes hostile, a little bit cooperative and a little bit competitive. During the 1950s, India and China enjoyed the spirit of 'Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai'. However, since the late 1950s the relations between the two countries remained under strains due to the diversity of matters, like the eruption of Tibet issue in 1959; the border dispute which prominently manifested in the 1962 war and the emergence of China-Pakistan nexus. The Indo-Soviet Peace Treaty of 1971 also worsened the relations between the duo due to the rift between China and the Soviet Union (Jetly 1979; Rajan 2007: 147-148). Nevertheless, the relations were restored in 1976 and further advanced by the visit of Indian Foreign Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 1979. During 1990s several 'Confidence Building Measures' (CBMs) were taken to establish trust and tranquility in the relations and finally in 1992, India-China border trade resumed (Garver 2010: 95-99; Rajan 2007: 148-152).

However, the atmosphere became tense after India's nuclear test in 1998, a thaw between two sides eventually emerged. Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit to China in 2003 was proved a turning point in the relations. Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to India in 2006 and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Visit to China in 2008 further increased warmth in bilateral relations as well as enhanced trade and investment flows between the two sides (Das 2007: 170-201; Rajan 2007: 152-155).

It appears, therefore, that "the problem in India–China relations has not been as much in terms of inimical relations between China and India as in the lack of mutual awareness, understanding and trust" (Singh 2008: 96). This is the reason why the pace of India-China relations was very slow during the past decades. The newly elected Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi acknowledged this and tuned up his China policy accordingly. His visit to China in May 2015 added, "symbolism and substance and it opened up a new chapter in India-China relations" (Ministry of External Affairs 2015). In addition, this visit also delivered a message to the international community that India-China relationship is ready to play a central role in the 21st century in Asia and beyond, with the recognition that the simultaneous rise of China and India as two major powers would have a profound impact on the course of this century.

It is, therefore, some scholars and policy makers liken Chung Tan (2015), Jabin Jacob (2015) and Jaishankar (2013) analysed this change as 'a new type of major power relationship' between India and China. They came at the conclusion that the interplay between the two major powers–India and China would determine the strategic balance in Asia and beyond. Thus, it would be crucial to see–whether the relations between two emerging Asian giants would transform in 'a new type of major power relationship' or they would remain stuck in an old type of 'slow-moving' relations.

An Overview of India-China Relations: from Nehru to Manmohan

India and China started their journey towards an amicable relationship in the 1950s. "The two countries established diplomatic relations on 1 April 1950 and India is the first out of the non-socialist countries to establish diplomatic relations with China"(Embassy of PRC in India 2004).

The then Indian Prime Minister Nehru invested in maintaining friendly ties because he "held a deep conviction that India-China friendship was the basis of an Asian resurgence" (Mansingh 2013:284). He did not take a strong stand on Tibet in 1950 and pursued an actively mediatory diplomacy to end the Korean War (Heimsath and Mansingh 1971: 65-74; Jain 1981: 29-35 cited in Mansingh 2013: 284). In a rare gesture, India displayed excessive zeal in promoting China's membership in United Nations. In 1954, Indian Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai exchanged visits. The two leaders jointly initiated the famous 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' (Panchsheel). The Bandung Conference (first Afro-Asian Conference) held in 1955 also highlighted India-China cooperation. Thus, the first decade of India-China relations was purely dominated by the slogan 'Hindi-Chini Bhai- Bhai' (India and China are brothers), promoted by Nehru. This strategy actually paid off. "India was able to maintain peace and tranquility on its northeastern borders for over a decade" (Jain 2004: 254).

However, by late 1950s, serious differences between the two countries had begun to surface, particularly over the un-demarcated border. Chinese premier Zhou Enlai refused to accept the 'McMahon line' as the final line of the border demarcation between India and China. The unresolved border issue led to India-China war by 1962.

Between 1962 and 1969, India-China relations remained in a deep freeze. Emboldened by its easy victory over India, China initiated a venomous and offensive propaganda against India that deepened India's suspicion of China even further. India's mistrust about China was further confirmed when China befriended Pakistan and started to extend military and political support to it. As a result, India-Pakistan war of 1965 and 1971 clearly reflected China's policy towards India. This anti-India policy adopted by China was also showcased in the form of encouraging and inciting

Naxal violence in India and provided training to Nagas and Mizos in China to fight against India (Jetley 1979: 79-293). The then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi kept striving to normalise relations. In 1967, Mrs. Indira Gandhi stated–

China continues to maintain an attitude of hostility towards us and spares no opportunity to malign us and to carry on anti-Indian propaganda not only against the Indian Government but the whole way of our democratic functioning and even our national integrity. (Lok Sabha Debate 1967)

This was a flex approach adopted by Mrs. Gandhi regarding relations with China. Hence, the period during 1959-1976 in India-China relations has been characterized as a period of mutual mistrust, suspicion, and unfriendliness.

India and China have undergone and seen an important era during 1976-1988 where both the nations made maximum efforts in dispelling doubts and misunderstanding. These efforts were again in terms of understanding each other mainly to create a very positive atmosphere. The year 1976 was a landmark year in India-China relations because both the countries had been able to restore their diplomatic ties by restoring their ambassadors. In 1979, the then Indian Prime Minister Morarji Desai sent his Foreign Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to China to extend the process of rapprochement. During this visit, Vajpayee broached the contentious border issue with Chinese leaders. Deng Xiaoping, a veteran Communist Party leader, told Vajpayee to avoid bringing the issue, on which both countries differed sharply into the discussion. He stated that China and India should have common ground while resolving differences. As for the boundary question between the two countries, they can solve it through peaceful consultation. This question should not prevent India and China from improving their relations in other fields (Jain 2004: 257).

The period during 1988-1998 has been characterized as a period of creating new atmosphere and trust in India-China bilateral relations. The ice in the relationship was broken when the then Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi visited China in December 1988. It was historic because the Prime Minister of India was visiting China after more than three decades. Both sides, India and China agreed to cooperate for mutual development on a number of issues, such as the creation of a 'New International Economic Order', disarmament, and pollution. The hallmark of the visit was the creation of 'Joint Working Group' (JWG) for resolving the boundary issue. The larger objective of the JWG was to articulate each other's concerns and analyse the options available before both the countries. At the same time, the objective was also to ensure the maintenance of peace and tranquility across the border during the negotiations process. (Garver 2010: 95-99; Mishra 2004: 66-67).

Following Rajiv Gandhi's China visit, the Chinese Premier Li Peng paid a return visit to India in December 1991. It was again a historic one because a Chinese Premier had not visited in the last more than three decades. Both India and China signed five agreements during Li Peng's visit to India. These five agreements were relating to the Consul treaty between India and China, Agreement on Restoration of Consulate General in Bombay and Shanghai, Memorandum on the Restoration of Border Trade, India-China Trade Protocol for the year 1992 and Scientific and Technological Cooperation in Outer Space. The bilateral relationship further strengthened when the then President of Indian President R. Venkatraman visited China in May 1992. Because of the visit, the border trade resumed in July 1992, after an interval of more than 30 years, and consulates reopened in Bombay and Shanghai in December 1992. Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's visit to China in September 1993 brought a new thaw in the bilateral relationship. The Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the 'Line of Actual Control' (LAC) in the India-China border areas signified that the border issue would be resolved amicably through peaceful and friendly negotiations. It was inherent in the agreement that neither side should use force or threaten to use force against the other. The two sides should strictly respect and observe the LAC before the border issue is settled and each side should keep its military forces in the areas along the

LAC to a minimum level. It was certainly an entry into a new era of India-China relations (Garver 2010: 95-99; Rajan 2007: 149-151).

The other signs of improvement in India-China relations came when Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited India in 1996. It further boosted the bonhomie and established 'Constrictive and Cooperative Partnership' between China and India. The agreement on CBMs gained lots of salience because it was pronounced that the suggested measures would aim at a fair, reasonable, and mutually acceptable settlement of the boundary question (Rajan 2007: 151).

The sunshine period in Sino-Indian relations once again became tense when India conducted nuclear tests in 1998. The Chinese saw the test as causing serious damage to the bilateral relations. Hence, the process of normalisation, which had been built over the years got derailed. Despite the furor created in China by India's nuclear test, a thaw between the two sides eventually emerged. (Rajan 2007: 152).

"The nuclear issue featured as an irritant in India-China relations for some time, which really put the bilateral relationship in a limbo" (Kumar, 2010:193). However, the visit of External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh to China in 1999, resumed the relations once again. Both countries were agree to

increase mutual understanding and trust; expand trade and economic cooperation; strengthen coordination and cooperation in international affairs; and properly handle issues left over from the past in the spirit of seeking common ground while reserving differences. (Rajan, 2007: 152)

The Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to China in June 2003 has further contributed to enhance cooperation between the two countries. India and China signed a 'Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation' and also mutually decided to appoint 'Special Representatives' (SRs) to explore the framework of a boundary settlement from the political perspective (Ministry of External Affairs 2015).

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visit to India in 2005 and President Hu Jintao's visit in 2006 further heightened the cooperation between two sides. They agreed to establish a 'Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity'. In the field of trade and commerce, both countries envisaged that the trade volume would increase to US\$ 20 billion by 2008. They also agreed to establish an Indian-Chinese Joint Economic Group and a Task Force to examine the feasibility and benefits of Trading Arrangements. China stated that it attached great importance to the status of India in international affairs and understood and supported India's desire to play an active role in the United Nations and the world. (Das 2007:174)

Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh visited China in January 2008. During this visit, India and China signed 'A Shared Vision on the 21st Century' and reached a broad consensus on the further pushing forward the Strategic Cooperative Partnership. They observed that such cooperation was necessary to combat climate change and develop energy security. The two countries agreed to promote the building of a harmonious world featured by everlasting peace and common prosperity. The then Chinese President Hu Jintao has pointed out this as one of the best periods in the history of India-China relations (Yan 2009).

When Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited India in December 2010, the two sides agreed to establish the mechanism of annual exchange of visit between the Foreign Ministers. In 2013, India-China released a Joint Statement during the visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and designated 2014 as the 'Year of Friendly Exchanges' between India and China and hold the first 'High Level Media Forum'. The reciprocated visit of Indian Prime Minister to China in October 2013, served to enhance the mutual trust and cooperation. Agreements relating to border, trans-border Rivers, establishing service centers for servicing power equipment in India, road transport and Nalanda University were signed during the visits (Ministry of External Affairs 2015). Hence, this period displayed new warmth in India-China bilateral relations.

The Beginning of a New Chapter in India-China Relations: Modi Era

During the regime of Dr. Manmohan Singh, India moved ahead to a closer relationship with its one of closest and most prominent neighbour-China. However, it seems that the tempo of relationship was a little slow.

The emergence of Narendra Modi on world stage [as Indian Prime Minister,] has given a pace to India's foreign policy. Style and substances of Modi's foreign policy is slightly different from his predecessors. (Gaurav 2015: 148)

From the day one in his office as a prime minister, he took a fresh perspective for India's neighbourhood policy. His invitation to Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit India on very next day of taking office was a significant diplomatic approach that was warmly welcomed in China. Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a visit to India in September 2014 on the '60th Anniversary of Panchsheel'. During the visit, Xi and Modi advanced the 'Strategic Cooperative Partnership' and signed a total of 16 agreements in various sectors including, commerce & trade, railways, space-cooperation, pharmaceuticals, audio-visual co-production, culture, establishment of industrial parks, sister-city arrangements etc. The two sides also signed a 'Memorandum of Understanding' (MoU) to open an additional route for 'Kailash Mansarovar Yatra' through Nathu La. The Chinese side also agreed to establish two Chinese Industrial Parks in India and expressed their intention to enhance Chinese investment in India (Ministry of External Affairs 2015).

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited China in May 2015. The visit was rich in symbolism and substance. Unlike his predecessors, during the visit, "Modi made candid, frank and direct remarks about his hosts by suggesting that the Chinese side is holding back on further improving relations" (Kondapalli 2015). Modi tried to approach the Chinese people directly in the hopes of expanding Indian soft power. He met with Chinese business tycoons and assured them for better business opportunities in India. He addressed Indian community and took their enthusiasms and expectations to a new level. Prashantham (2015) asserted- "whatever the actual outcomes of Modi's visit for Sino-Indian business, the event has already made history in bringing together far-flung expats of Indian origin in China on an unprecedented scale".

During Modi's visit to China, 24 agreements signed on the government-to-government side, 26 MoUs on the business-to-business side and two joint statements, including one on climate change (Ministry of External Affairs 2015). The visit also delivered a message to the international community regarding cooperation between India and China. There was agreement among the leaders that India-China relationship is poised to play a defining role in the 21st century in Asia and beyond, with the recognition that the simultaneous re-emergence of India and China as two major powers would have a profound impact on the course of this century. The Joint Statement signed by India and China during the visit had a separate section on 'shaping the regional and global agenda' where India and China, as two major poles in the global architecture, agree to cooperate on a host of issues ranging from WTO, climate change and terrorism to regional organizations. Former Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao argued-

Modi, goes to China, bearing his message of INCH (India and China) towards MILES (Millennium of Exceptional Synergy), he is in tune with the synergy of that earlier millennium in relations between the two countries, conscious of the smallness of the present in India China interaction, and the length of the road ahead as the two countries seek to build harmony in the midst of differences. (Rao 2015)

Thus it is very obvious to understand that Modi added a new chapter in India-China relations by his unique style and approach. By enhancing greater economic cooperation with China, he tried to push longstanding political differences aside. There was a candid message in his visit that "a partnership for development between India and China is a win-win partnership and neither side can lose in such a transaction" (Rao 2015).

Prospects for a New Type of Major Power Relationship

The new warmth in India –China relations in the Modi regime has been analysed by several scholars as the beginning of ‘new type of major power relationship’ between India and China.

Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar (2013) initiated this debate earlier when he was Ambassador in China but it could not get such buzz that time. Now with the success of Modi’s visit to China, this term again is in momentum. However, it is fashionable in China today to speak of a ‘new type of major power relations, indeed of international relations as a whole. In Chinese terminology, this approach meant— non-conflict and non-cooperation including proper handling of differences, mutual respect of core interests and major concerns, and common development that seeks win-win solutions (Jaishankar 2013).

The rising power of both China and India to global prominence and the thrust for the betterment of relations despite the differences and disputes showcased the prospects for a ‘new type of major power relations’ between them. The joint statement signed during Modi’s visit reflects that India and China are ready to begin a new type of relationship. Jacob (2015) also saw the new style and approach initiated by Modi, as an important element of ‘new type of major power relationship’ (cited in Xu 2015).

The idea of this new type of major power relationship reflects the growing interdependence of a globalised world, the increasing dispersal of power, where one power or group of powers are no longer dominant and the possibility of convergence on some issues coexisting with contradiction on others (Jaishankar 2013).

Applying this approach to India-China relations offers some interesting insights. Both at an abstract and practical level, the prospects of ‘new type of major power relations’ between India and China appear unexceptionable. There is a broad acceptance that the international relations today cannot operate under considerable constraints. As being two rising powers of the world, particularly in Asia; India and China are more interdependent on each other. From trade to technological development, both countries need cooperation. Rivalry between the two fastest growing economies of the world– India and China, is virtually inevitable. But what is not inevitable is whether this rivalry is friendly or bitter. Both countries understand the facts that a bitter rivalry is not in their interest as no one is going to dominate the region at a time of increasing dispersal of power. Convergence of interests is preferable over differences, if they want to sustain their economic growth. The idea of ‘Chindia’ initiated by Indian Member of Parliament Jairam Ramesh also reflects the same type of relationship that implies the principles of ‘coexistence, cooperation, and common development’. In addition, the concept of ‘new type of major power relationship’ is no different from the India’s innovative policy of ‘Panchsheel’ (Five principles of peaceful coexistence) that is the basis of peaceful relations between India and China.

Thus, Tan (2015) affirmed that the new leadership of China is looking for the establishment of new type of major power relationship with India although not saying it so specifically. But it is very obvious to say that this relationship will be something different and more inevitable than the one that was initiated with the United States of America. Because what is needed to establish this type of relationship, has been being practiced by India since independence. Hence, Klein (2015) argues– “if China really means what it says when it urges a ‘new type of great power relationship’ then it has something to learn from India in how it approaches its neighbors and the international system”. The prospect, therefore, is vibrant for the establishment of ‘new type of major power relationship’ between India and China, and scholars and diplomats of both sides are eager to see a candid and clear approach towards this.

Conclusion

Forging a 'new type of major power relationship' is a novel concept in the international relations that China has proposed and emphasized to formulate an operational policy towards the United States, but is not limited to it. China and India, the two largest developing countries, are also winding their way toward this type of relationship. The increasing mutual trust and cooperation for the common interests, common concerns, and common developments between the two countries indicate that both are keen to take their relationship to a new level in the 21st century. Modi's visit to China can be seen as a foundation stone for establishing a new type of relation, which would be based on equality, mutuality, and win-win solution. Thus, looking to the new beginning in India-China relations, Rao (2015) argues—"the two countries that gave the world 'Panchsheel', cannot live in mutual exclusion. Indians and Chinese cannot be brothers, but they can be partners".

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