

## **India's 'Look East' and China's 'March West' Policy: Seeking 'Convergence'**

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The relations between China and India is of global significance, perhaps only second to China-US relations. Both China and India are the prominent Asian powers.<sup>i</sup> The international community hopes that the two powers would avail the emerging opportunities to engage with each other constructively as the world progresses towards the 'Asian Century'.<sup>ii</sup>

The paper seeks to identify the opportunities and challenges for China and India to bridge the 'March West' concept with the 'Look East' policy. It also aims to examine the convergences and divergences, and identify the 'common grounds' to promote cooperation in bilateral as well as multilateral fora.

India's post-Cold War 'Look east' policy was initiated in the 1990, not only to engage with the ASEAN and East Asia in the economic domain.<sup>iii</sup> But also to firm up strategic relations with these countries through extensive consultations on regional and global security issues and sustained engagement.<sup>iv</sup> India's increasing energy requirements and economic growth have evinced New Delhi's interest in the affairs of the Asia-Pacific.<sup>v</sup> New Delhi perceives this region as an opportunity for securing its strategic and security interests. Almost, 33 per cent of India's trade with the Asia Pacific transits through this region. The new government at New Delhi has lately provided a boost to India's Look East policy in a manner that India can graduate from 'Look East' to 'Act East'.<sup>vi</sup>

The strategic rationale for China's engagement in its west is driven by *inter alia* its dependence on Africa and Central Asian Republics (CAR) for resources, the economic development of its western provinces, and the security of its energy 'lifelines' stretching across the Indian Ocean Region.

In the 1980s, India and China built a structure of cooperation on four pillars: regular summits and high-level meetings, military confidence-building measures, border negotiations, and increasing trade. In the following years, the emerging geopolitical realities and the new security environment made it necessary for the two countries to redefine their engagement.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said that,

*"China is willing to work with India to integrate our development strategies, exchange our development experiences, synchronise India's Look East Policy with China's policy of opening up to the west, so as to seek common development and make due contribution to the world civilization".<sup>vii</sup>*

As Xi Jinping's special envoy to India, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, a message to Indian leadership under Prime Minister, Narendra Modi:

*"...Chinese leaders pay attention to growing relations with India, common interests between the two countries far outweigh disputes, we are natural partners rather than rivals and the Chinese and Indian dream integrate with each other, so we should build closer partnership with each other."<sup>viii</sup>*

The rapid and simultaneous rise of China and India has raised some concerns about an inevitable, if not existential, competition between the two emerging powers. But, Chinese

and Indian leaders tend to emphasize in the past that the relationship is stable and downplay any talk of rivalry. According to former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao,

*"China and India are partners for cooperation and not rivals in competition. There is enough space in the world for the development of both China and India."*<sup>ix</sup>

Similarly, former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has insisted,

*"India and China are not in competition.... There is enough economic space for us both."*<sup>x</sup>

The growing convergence between the two countries is best exemplified by the rapid increase in bilateral trade: from \$2 billion in 2000 to \$70 billion in 2014, which is expected to touch \$100 billion by 2015.<sup>xi</sup>

While the opportunities emerge from the many convergences between China and India, there are challenges as well, which are largely premised upon the divergences between the two countries out of competing national interests and strategic considerations like border dispute and infrastructure development along the border, China-Pakistan relations, and issue of river water diversion by China.

The greatest challenge to the increasing warmth in Sino-Indian relations comes from the intractable border dispute. The border problem is rooted in the competing nationalisms of India and China. As both countries were victims of imperialism, they upheld territorial integrity and sovereignty as their supreme national interests. Also, both regard their territorial claims as righteous. Coupled with this, are their competing strategic interests in an overlapping geo-political region. It was no coincidence that Jawaharlal Nehru regarded China as a threat for he felt Indian and Chinese cultures have been contesting for supremacy for hundreds of years in Central Asia, Burma, Tibet and the countries of Southeast Asia. Due to competing nationalisms and diverse strategic considerations of both

the countries, final solution of the border dispute has remained elusive. In fact, the final solution of the border calls for a spirit of accommodation and compromise. So far Seventeen rounds of Joint Working Group (JWG) meetings on boundary negotiations and six rounds of Special Representative Group (SRG) meetings have not yielded any solution to the border dispute. This is indicative of the complexities involved in the India-China boundary dispute. It is worthwhile to recall Pei Yuanying's (former Chinese ambassador to India) statement that

*“differences between the two sides on the border issue are too big to be completely solved in the near future.”<sup>xii</sup>*

Sujit Dutta, a member of the India-China Eminent Persons' Group, set up by the two governments in 2001 for high-level Track-II dialogue, says,

*“a quick and easy solution to the boundary dispute does not exist unless India again makes a unilateral concession by accepting the imposed line of 1962. A reasonable and acceptable settlement would have to be worked out through a hard bargain whose outcome will be determined by relative power, perceptions of overall costs and gains, and diplomatic leverages.”<sup>xiii</sup>*

China's arming of Pakistan is a continuing concern for New Delhi<sup>xiv</sup>. But, even on Pakistan, Beijing and New Delhi find their interests converging on different aspects.<sup>xv</sup> Political instability, the rapid expansion of Islamist extremism, and the growing radical influences in Pakistan have intensified China's worries about Pakistan's future,<sup>xvi</sup> especially after the 2009 and 2011 riots in the Xinjiang and latest incidents of violence in the province. China has aptly identified the link between Uighur militants trained and based in Pakistan with the riots in Xinjiang.<sup>xvii</sup>

China and India could find themselves in conflict over sharing of river waters. As industrialization increases the use of fresh water, India worries that the rivers originating in the Tibetan plateau and flowing southwards to India as a lower riparian state will be diverted to China's own water-scarce provinces.<sup>xviii</sup>

India's strengthening ties with the US and instabilities in Tibet also issues of contention. The South China Sea (SCS) is a major international route for sea trade. Though India is not party to the maritime territorial disputes in the region, it holds an interest in maritime security and the Freedom of Navigation<sup>xix</sup>. New Delhi has reiterated its stance on underlining the necessity for unqualified access to international waters and the upholding of established tenets of international law.<sup>xx</sup> There are certainly some differences among countries on the issue of sovereignty. In Indian perspective, these issues should be resolved through consultations as per the international norms.

While relations between China and India are also beset by issues of military security, comprehensive cooperation is the only viable proposition. First, unlike past global powers such as Britain, Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union, and the United States, whose rise was accompanied by the capacity to fight massive wars far beyond their borders, China and India cannot rise through expansion backed by military might.<sup>xxi</sup> War, conflict, and unregulated competition between them would endanger the very arrangements that are making their rise possible. Thus, economic and political reforms at home, not the threat or use of military power, are China's and India's preoccupation.

Secondly, the rise of China and India illustrates more clearly that the western, resource-intensive economic model is simply not capable of meeting the growing needs of more than 8 billion people in the twenty-first century. Major shifts in resource use, technologies, policies, and even basic values are needed. As China and India become

world-class economies, they are set to join already industrialized nations as major consumers of resources and polluters of local and global ecosystems. And while the largest burden of these developments will fall on China and India themselves, the global impact is clear. So, both India and China seek a refinement of the existing international order ranging from the out-dated Bretton Woods institutions to the UN, to reflect the current realities and imperatives.<sup>xxii</sup> China and India have major stake in the global economy. Both are concerned about the ill-regulated financial sectors, the fiscal crisis, and recession in the West, as well as the large amount of liquidity pumped into the advanced economies by central banks -- liquidity that is causing volatility in capital flows and commodity prices elsewhere. This worry was underlined in the BRICS joint communiqué in March this year. Both countries are also concerned by a possible turn to protectionism among developed countries as their manufacturing base migrates to the developing world.

China and India are among the countries that will be the most affected by global warming. The Himalayan glaciers, feeding the great rivers of China, India, and Southeast Asia, are melting.<sup>xxiii</sup> Indian experts predict that by 2050 the icy area on their side of the Himalayas will shrink by more than a quarter. Indian glaciologist's estimate that in 20 to 30 years, the Himalayan glaciers would have receded substantially, leaving many rivers dependent on seasonal rainfall.<sup>xxiv</sup> The impact of global warming on river waters suggests that China and India must collaborate more intently on the exchange of hydrological data, and on adaptation mechanisms to deal with the consequences of glacial melt. The two countries can cooperate on energy efficiency, environmental conservation, and most importantly, on renewable energy resources.

India and China could also co-operate towards international and regional security. While China is closely connected to East Asia's security, it is also in India's interest that

peace and stability prevail in the region. New Delhi does not want to take sides in a potential South China Sea conflict.<sup>xxv</sup> Also, like Beijing, it doesn't want a nuclear North Korea. It is in China and India's interest that Islamist extremists and terrorists in Central, South, and Southeast Asia are checked. As a convergent theme of India's 'Look East' and China's 'March West', the two countries could potentially cooperate in preserving maritime security, including as a part of the emerging multilateral architecture in Asia.

India and China's continued economic development at home and their expanding economic footprints abroad is lending strategic importance to energy from West Asia and Central Asia.<sup>xxvi</sup> China's interest in Central Asia is primarily driven by economics and energy needs.<sup>xxvii</sup> In September 2013, President Xi Jinping trip to Central Asia, he signed agreements with CARs to enhance China's energy security, deepen cooperation with Central Asian governments on border security, and unveiled his "new Silk Road" policy of free trade and exchange.<sup>xxviii</sup> China is also concerned about instability in Central Asia caused by the recent crisis in Ukraine and the potential impact on Western China.<sup>xxix</sup> India's stand has been similar to that of China.

While China seeks a role in SAARC, India does the same in SCO.<sup>xxx</sup> Both India and China could play an important role. India should not be wary of expecting the convergence to translate into any real cooperation on the ground in Afghanistan or for its full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. India and Afghanistan are members of SAARC while China also has an important role. India and China have formed a strategic partnership with Afghanistan, by increasing aid with rebuilding and infrastructure projects. And if both China and India continue to develop their presence in Afghanistan, they will inevitably become a greater political and security actors with their

own interests to protect. With the United States scheduled to withdraw its military forces from Afghanistan by December 2014.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Both China and India have interests in the Arctic. On 15 May 2013, the two Asian giants were granted permanent observer status in the Arctic Council.<sup>xxxii</sup> Even though India and China lack territorial contiguity with the polar region, constructive relations with the Council's permanent members and participation in research programs will go a long way in securing common interests. India has accrued enormous knowledge capital in polar sciences and can offer its Antarctica experience and contribute to the understanding of climate-induced changes underway in the Arctic.<sup>xxxiii</sup> For its part, Arctic Council will facilitate India and China's communication and cooperation with relevant parties on Arctic affairs within the framework of the Council and promote peace, stability, and sustainable development of the Arctic region.

At the international level, India and China as developing countries have coordinated at many multilateral institutions, including at the United Nations on the issue of state sovereignty and the non-interference principle; at the world Trade Organisation and G-20 against trade protectionism and the rights of the developing countries; on climate change proposals; and overall in fashioning a more equitable world order. The five-nation BRICS format has further expanded such interactions between the two countries. However, China and India need to enhance multilateral cooperation at various regional and international fora like BRICS, EAS, ADMM+, BIMSTEC, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, Arctic Council, ASEAN Regional Forum etc. India and China convergence in new economic multilateral initiatives like Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and their stand on Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) are also similar.

## **Conclusion**

China and India have adopted very similar approach for cooperation. Both stresses the importance of international cooperation, multilateral security dialogues, diplomatic outreach, negotiation as the primary method of dispute resolution, and expanded economic ties. Additionally, both generally eschew unilateral or coalitional attempts to address Asia's security challenges. Instead, China and India stress the importance of multilateral and regional fora while remaining cognizant that some security challenges are best dealt with at the bilateral level. Both countries also envision a proactive and positive role for themselves in resolving the region's disputes and even guaranteeing their neighbours' security. With their growing economies, expanding ecological footprints, and rising political influence, China and India will need to be a part of any plausible global effort to build a sustainable world economy.

China and India could become strategic partners in the true sense, rather than viewing each other as hostile competitors. Currently, it seems that a certain degree of asymmetry exists in China's and India's perceptions of each other. In contrast, to the extent that India features in Chinese strategic thinking, it is viewed more as a development partner, rather than a competitor. The different views affect the efficiency of co-operation, which has already led to misunderstandings between the two. Therefore, to achieve fully the goal of co-operation based on common interests, China and India should first adjust their view of each other's role in their foreign policy, by viewing each other as real strategic partners, beyond mere rhetoric. On the regional level, China and India are stakeholders in maintaining regional peace, stability and prosperity. They should go beyond zero-sum thinking and employ a co-operative attitude to resolve their differences

and address common regional challenges. Globally, they should play a greater role in the process of reforming global governance.

## Endnotes

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