

60 Years of Sino-Indian Interactions: Comprehending the Multifarious Dimensions of Inter-relationship

Sree Kerala Varma College, Thrissur

12-14 December 2011

Shifting Equilibrium: Explaining Sino-Indian Relations since 2005

12 December 2011

Jabin T. Jacob

Assistant Director, Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS), Delhi

e-mail: jabinjacob@gmail.com

What do I mean by “**Shifting Equilibrium**”? And why do I choose **2005** as a cut-off year?

Shifting Equilibrium

- **one**, Sino-Indian relations remain stable broadly speaking despite all the ‘incursions’, incidents, ‘needling’, cancellations, what have you – hence, the term, equilibrium
- **two**, however, after every incident and its reaction (usually it is the Indian side that is reacting, and I do not at all intend this in a negative sense), the relationship **climbs up a notch or moves to a new level of stability** or equipoise – hence, the adjective, shifting. In other words, what I am trying to say is Sino-Indian relations today are not what they used to be in 2005, leave alone what they were in 2000. Or to put it more crudely, I would argue that balance of power – let us call it initiative, perhaps – has moved in favour of India. How and why, is this the case?

Why 2005?

I believe that the “tremendous transformation” and “increasing pragmatism” that the conference brochure talks about has been particularly evident since 2005.

One, the Agreement on Guiding Principles and Political Parameters helped India stand on equal political footing with China.

- to continue to talk to China on the bases of military realities on the ground, military CBMs and the like would be to continue to reinforce the gap in military capabilities between the two sides, not to mention the fact of the Indian defeat in 1962
- whereas an agreement to consider matters in a political context allowed a comparatively weaker India to play more cards at the table, so to speak

- therefore, might we conclude that if there is Chinese intransigence on the boundary dispute and if this intransigence is due to their concerns about Tibet, there is possibly similar intransigence from India on the dispute? An Indian intransigence that is not just the result of feeling wronged, but also related to a deeper political understanding of China's troubles in Tibet
- the Agreement allowed India to pull one back after decades ruling wasted opportunities and came at a time when China was certainly pulling ahead in terms of global profile. The Agreement ensured that there was no way that China's rise would necessarily politically weaken India vis-à-vis China.

- and this by the way, does say some important things about Chinese foreign policy

Two, the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal that was born in 2005 would over the course of the next few years change Chinese perceptions of India

- as a sort of back-up came the Indo-US deal (July 2005) right after the Sino-Indian agreement (April 2005)
- closer Indo-US ties helped India stand on equal geopolitical footing with China
- over time, the Chinese would feel increasingly resentful about this deal that stole the thunder from the Sino-Indian Agreement

- and this too says something about Chinese foreign policy

- India was never lightly regarded by the Chinese, I think once the 1998 nuclear tests took place and India explicitly pointed the finger at China
- the progress in the relationship until 2005, including the Sino-Indian Agreement of that year, came about because this new perception of India combined with an increasing concern that the Chinese had with respect to the US role in the region following 9/11 – remember the Indo-US Next Steps in Strategic Partnership was signed in January 2004
- The Indo-US nuclear deal was something else entirely
 - its larger political ramifications were not lost on the Chinese – remember the Sino-US rapprochement in 1971 and what happened to the Soviet Union less than 20 years later?

Thus, the Indo-US nuclear deal significantly changed the terms of the Sino-Indian engagement for the Chinese. And I have no doubt that our foreign policy establishment was well aware of the consequences. Since 2005, therefore, I think the Chinese have combined diplomacy with coercion in a finer balance given the extended regional situation. And importantly, Indian foreign policy has matched the Chinese, even if the Indian media might have different ideas. Hence,

- **we have from the Chinese**
 - continuing high-profile visits,
 - continued emphasis on multilateral forums – BRICS, RIC

- sympathetic noises, possibly even genuine Chinese support for
 - India's UNSC permanent seat
 - Indian membership of the SCO
- **but, we also have from the Chinese**
 - incursions and violations of the LAC (which in itself is a bit problematic formulation because clearly the two sides do not have a common understanding of the LAC)
 - stapled visas (again, there's a difference between the Kashmir and Arunachal case)
- **and, we have from the Indians a willingness to push the envelope on**
 - Japan
 - Vietnam
 - South China Sea

To return to **shifting equilibrium**

I mentioned that the relationship “**climbs**” a **notch** with each change in equilibrium – in other words, it does not deteriorate. I believe that the Sino-Indian relationship despite the perceived problems continues to progress to a level of better mutual understanding and sensitivity over each other's interests and concerns.

I am not saying that the relations are very good or that India and China will become fast friends soon. No, in fact, what is happening is that the two sides have moved to a level where they cannot ignore each other and must react to each other's moves .

And there are plenty of moves that either side makes whether directly or indirectly aimed at the other. And in the course of these moves they are learning just how much they can push each other, where they can ask for compromises and perhaps, even how to win compromises.

However, **the biggest positive change in the relationship is that the level of understanding of the other side has gone up by tremendously.**

- It is no longer the case that the Chinese are largely 'indifferent' to India or that the Indian side is hyper-critical of China while at the same time being ignorant of how China actually operates. And when I say India and China here, I am referring to both the government and the people.
- This is not to say that either the indifference or ignorance on both sides has completely disappeared. Far from it. There's still a long way to go, and I'd say that the positives still are not enough to prevent the Sino-Indian relationship from lapsing into what I would call a state of '**cold peace**' – a state of no war, no overt conflicts, but continued sparring, continued suspicions of each other

Nevertheless, the movement from the past – **why I say that Sino-Indian relations are qualitatively different from what obtained even at the beginning of this century – is because this cold peace is not entirely unique to Sino-Indian ties.**

- where before, Sino-Indian hostility was defined by a specific factor, ie, the boundary dispute, today, Sino-Indian hostility has the generic features of a clash of interests of any two big powers in the world such as the US and China and not always defined by geography
- for the future, even **ideology** might turn out to be a reason for differences between India and China
- and even if the **boundary dispute** remains a constant for the foreseeable future
- there will always be the '**newer**' **differences** such as those over the unbalanced trade relationship, water perhaps, climate change responsibilities

At the same time, the relationship is mature enough or perhaps interdependent enough to ensure that the two countries will cooperate where possible and that they are unlikely to be cussed enough not to cooperate when there are benefits to be had

- for example, BASIC at Copenhagen
- RIC, G-20, BRICS
- one might question the functional effectiveness of these forums but one cannot quibble over the fact that two countries that need to engage with each other often at these forums cannot suddenly engage in a shooting match not because it is not possible – of course, anything is possible – but **because, conflict would spoil their image as potential world leaders and prospects as rising powers.**
- especially, with respect to China, this issue of the image is particularly important. I always wonder why Indian strategists who use a cultural and historical framework to view Chinese actions – that they think long-term, rely on the *Sunzi Bingfa* (Sun Zi's Art of War), etc – cannot also consider the possibility that for the same reasons the Chinese can conclude that cooperation and/or compromise rather than conflict is the way forward.
- Just because the Sino-Indian boundary dispute remains unresolved does not mean:
 - a) that it is all China's fault
 - b) that it cannot be resolved