

Impressions of Visit to Chengdu and Tibet Regions of China

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Introduction

I visited Chengdu and Tibet from 08 Sep to 14 Sep 2018, on the invitation from South Asia Centre, Sichuan University of China. The USI of India and the Sichuan University have signed MoU for undertaking joint research projects and exchange of scholars for seminars, Round Table Discussions (RTDs) and lectures. The two institutions have produced a book, “China’s One Belt one Road Initiative, Challenges and Prospects”. The joint project, “Building Strategic Trust between India and China” is underway. South Asia Centre is one of the nodal academic centres on India. The top management enjoys direct access to senior policy makers in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

During the recent visit, South Asia Centre had organized a brainstorming session on the geopolitical developments and their impact on Sino - Indian relations. The Chinese side was represented by Dr Sun Shihai, the Director of South Asia Centre and a galaxy of top level professors from the University. This was followed by a visit to the suburbs of Chengdu and Tibet. My impressions from the discussions and visit are summarised in the succeeding paragraphs.

Unraveling of China Dream

The Chinese are enthused with ‘China Dream’ that inter alia posits rejuvenation of China as a great power by 2049. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is de-facto China’s grand strategy, China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) its flagship project and Xi Jinping as the main architect. The US is perceived as a threat to the rise of China; and India and Japan as the principal players with proclivity to bind with Washington to balance China. China perceives US trade war as part of the US ploy to stymie its rise. So the primary focus for China for the moment is how to deal with an intransigent Trump Administration on priority. Much of Xi Jinping’s credibility is predicated on the prognosis of the BRI. There are concerns that

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a pushback on the BRI will cause socio- economic stress in the country and impinge on the credibility of Xi Jinping as a core leader. Internally, one of the principal concerns of China is the radicalization of the Muslim population in the Xinjiang province and international condemnation it has attracted on the Human rights violations. Externally, their primary concern remains the future trajectory of Sino - US relations.

Internal Dynamics

There is considerable internal debate on Xi Jinping's decision to abolish the term limit, do away with Deng's 'Collective Leadership Model', effect of the US economic sanctions on China and social stresses, caused due to rapid urbanization. Barring some elite Netizens, majority believe that leadership continuity is an imperative to weed out corruption and marginalize groups resisting reforms. There is a belief that Xi Jinping will seek one more term and then hopefully handover power to a new leader. There is a view that nomination of a successor well in advance has its own flaws, such as, creation of coteries, cliques, parallel power centres and jostling for influence. There are concerns that sustained economic sanctions could bring down China's GDP, incrementally ranging from 0.3 per cent to 1.0 per cent. Such a reduction would entail loss of about 10 million jobs in the manufacturing sector and resultant displacement of workers mostly to urban centres. China believes that the US economic sanctions notwithstanding, it would remain the centre of gravity of the global supply chain. The sanctions are bound to hit American consumers and give jitters to the world economy. China intends to mitigate reduction in exports by enhancing domestic consumption. Presently, 60 per cent of Chinese population lives in urban areas. Rapid urbanization has caused socio – economic strain in the society. Most of the government schools in urban areas are over-crowded, with a teacher to student ratio reaching 1:80, and these schools are unable to accommodate more students, who are being diverted to poorly run and costly private schools. There is acute housing crisis for the young, who earn on an average US \$400 a month and support their parents and in most cases even grandparents. The bank mortgage on house loans is extremely high; per person, 25 per cent for one house, 50 per cent for two houses 75 per cent for three houses.

About 400 million people have transformed from agriculture sector to industry. Xi Jinping is focussing on developing industry in the relatively less developed western and central parts of China. There is a nation - wide campaign of mapping the poorest clusters in every province and allocating resources for their development. Relocation of people from far flung hamlets to new model cluster villages is underway. There is a drive for collection of more taxes from rich provinces and invest money in the less developed provinces. A new 'Rural-Urban Integration Model' forms the basis of development through rapid transport corridors and satellite townships. Villagers are being encouraged to create land banks and pool their resources to develop farmhouses and commercial enterprises to generate and share profits for improving living standards. Suburbs of Chengdu have a number of model villages, farmhouses, restaurants, recreational and conference facilities. The urban people visit these facilities to transact business, as well as experience village life.

The Communist party has 90 million members. CCP branches exist down to village level. Senior party members are mandated to identify potential party candidates based on their talent, skills and behaviour. The newly introduced 'Social Credit System' effectively monitors the ideological orientation and behaviour of people. After evaluating their performance, they are granted party membership. Nomination papers are scrutinized and endorsed by select committees, before participation in elections. There is a proper election system for entry into committees at the district, prefecture, province and central level. Chinese ensure that top leadership rises from grass-root levels, village, town, county, prefecture, provinces, under a very well defined appraisal system. Xi Jinping started his career as deputy of a county. The party and the administration work in tandem to jointly plan and execute development projects. Restructuring of CCP by Xi Jinping has rendered party factions such as the Youth Communist League, Princelings, Shanghai Gang (Jiang Zemin clique) more of a myth. There is a well-streamlined system of addressing grievances. The constitution permits people to hold protests albeit with prior permission from the police. The aggrieved people can address their complaints to the Administration and CCP committees up the chain. Inspection and Discipline committees are effectively dealing with the grievances and disciplining erring officials and party members.

Developments in Tibet

I visited Tibet from 10 Sep to 13 Sep 2018. During the Tibet tour, two scholars from the Sichuan University, who hold the membership of the CCP and a local Tibetan guide, conducted me. I visited Lhasa town, its suburbs and travelled along the Central Highway and Qinghai – Tibet Railway (QTR) to Namtso Lake. Chinese travel companies conduct select groups of foreign tourists after obtaining permit from the Foreign Office. Tibet figures prominently in China's strategic calculus; it being the water tower of Asia, being rich in resources and the fact that it shares vast borders with India, Nepal and Bhutan. China can use water and disputed border as a strategic leverage vis a vis India. China has adopted two-prong strategy to assimilate Tibet, i.e. firstly, the massive development of the region and the second, social re-engineering of the Tibetan population. China has developed massive multi-modal connectivity in Tibet. Gongga (65 km from Lhasa), is a modern airport astride Tsangpo River; with frequent flights to different parts of China. There is a regular international flight from Lhasa to Kathmandu. China is funding the construction of Nepal consulate in the Norbulinka complex, where reportedly the old Indian mission was housed before the annexation of Tibet by China. The airport has multiple runways and a portion of the airfield is used for military aircraft. The Central Highway connects the airport with Lhasa town across a 2.5 km long bridge system and a 2.5 km long tunnel system over the Tsangpo River. There are about seven passenger trains from Golmund (Qinghai province) to Lhasa (13 hours journey) and about three from Lhasa to Shigatse (less than three hours travel time), besides several goods trains. People from seven cities in China can travel by train to Lhasa. These trains are painted in disruptive olive green colour, probably keeping their military usage in mind. I travelled on the Class 70 Central Highway 65 Km short of Nagqu (the mother logistic base in Tibet) and further North to the Namtso Lake, which is located in super – high altitude area (above 16,000 feet) of north Tibet. It is the world's highest salt lake (70 km x 30 Km) connected from the Central Highway across 5190 metres high Lagingla pass. The Central Highway is being developed into an Expressway. There are a large number of resting and fuel stations on the way. Stringent accident prevention and rescue facilities are in place at regular intervals. Tourist companies have installed cameras in cabs and

drivers are periodically advised to watch speed limits and halt for rests. The mountains in the northern Tibet are ideally suited for conducting third stage acclimatization of troops and for operation-oriented training for contingencies in the super high altitude region. The road can easily carry two-way heavy and long containers/prime movers. Wi-Fi and mobile connectivity exists in every nook and corner of Tibet.

Lhasa city wears a modern look with wide roads, public squares, parks, multi-storey flats and swanky office buildings. Buddhist temples and monasteries are very well kept. The new Lhasa city looks like a classic Paris Street with pubs, discotheque and departmental stores, selling international brands. The town is well laid out with trilingual signposts in Tibetan, Mandarin and English languages. People in Tibet have access to good quality of life, medical facilities and job opportunities. The life span has increased from 40 years, a few decades ago, to about 70 years. Most of the youth are gainfully employed in airport security, local police, administration and in the tourism sector. As part of social re-engineering and population control drive, about 20 per cent Hans have settled in Tibet. Most of the villagers and nomads have been settled in model village clusters that have roads, internet connectivity, electricity, schools, horse playgrounds, comfortable houses and sheds for the herd. Schooling till 12th standard is compulsory. Mandarin is compulsory from the first class level and is a criterion for getting government jobs. In fact, majority of youth in Lhasa now speak Mandarin and lure for Tibetan language is fading.

Amidst the razzle-dazzle of modernity, Tibetan Buddhists feel major spiritual deficit and a loss of inheritance. The institution of Dalai Lama is revered as a spiritual and temporal head since the time of recognition of 4th Dalai Lama by the Mongol king and the 5th Dalai Lama by the Chinese emperor. The Indian Buddhist connection is vivid in every nook and corner of 7th Century old Jokhang temple and Potala palace. Jokhang temple's architectural style is a mixture of Indian Vihara design and also Tibetan and Nepalese designs. In 1049 AD, Atisha, a renowned teacher of Buddhism taught in Jokhang. Around the 14th century, the temple was associated with the Vajrsana in India. Shankarakshita and Padmasambhava are highly regarded spiritual heads whose statues are installed prominently in the temple complex. The priceless

ancient statue of Jowo Sakyamuni, that is, the Buddha at the age of 12, is the most venerated religious image in Tibet. In Potala palace, there exist photographs and Tombs of previous Dalai Lamas. One can see pictures of Karmapa in some tourist Taxis. The reason assigned for permitting display of picture of Karmapa is that in contrast to the 14th Dalai Lama, he has never criticized China. Chinese consider Dalai Lama a splitist for his demand of Greater Tibet that would entail re-constituting the boundaries of four existing Chinese provinces or autonomous regions, Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan. Such an idea of redrawing the boundaries on the ethnic lines is deemed as being secessionist and hence it is a Red Line for the CCP leadership.

CCP has done away with the system of adopting Lamaism at a young age. The children cannot go to seminaries till they have acquired formal education unto the 12th standard (18 years of age) in the government schools. Also, Chinese have put their own people in the management of Buddhist shrines, who provide a strict oversight on how these shrines are run. China thinks this is necessary to control corruption in the monasteries. The effect of social re-engineering is manifest in the streets of Lhasa, where more youth are attired in swanky dresses playing with their smartphones than dressed in traditional costumes with their fingers on the beads.

Evolving Sino-Indian Relations

Post the Wuhan Summit, China has decided to whip up interaction with India at all levels with a view to gauge and shape India's perceptions. While they respect India's resolve to maintain strategic autonomy, the skepticism about growing strategic proximity between India and the US persists. China perceives that signing of Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and possibly Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) in the near future is bound to make India and the US as de-facto strategic allies, which would be inimical to China's interests. China, therefore, seeks to improve relations with India, lest it out-rightly falls in the US orbit. Also, China is keenly watching how India and Russia steer their strategic relations and execute recent defence deals in the face of Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) imposition. In the Chinese view, India wields

considerable influence in South Asia and inter alia resorts to coercive strategy, particularly with Nepal, Sri Lanka and Maldives. They felt that India tried to intimidate the outgoing regime in Maldives but without much avail. China would keenly watch how India deals with the new regime in Maldives. There are concerns about politico – economic stability in Pakistan. Given the Pakistan's sensitivity vis-à-vis India, there is unlikely to be any significant policy shift in Beijing on Pakistan, which has become a lynchpin in Beijing's South Asia/Indian Ocean Region strategic calculus. There is a yearning to enhance economic engagement with India, particularly on extension of Nathula trade route to Kolkata, China - Nepal - India Economic Corridor, Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM), connectivity from Kunming to Assam, export of Darjeeling tea and expansion of item list for the border trade.

Conclusion

The Chinese look at the geopolitical issues purely from the prism of their core interests and seem to have hazy understanding of India's core interests and concerns. They candidly admitted the need to interact frequently with India's strategic community to develop a balanced perspective on India. The evolving geopolitical scenario demands that Beijing focuses on the US challenge and avoids any overt confrontation with India. However, the ongoing thaw in the bilateral relations notwithstanding, the Sino- India relations will continue to be characterized by three Cs; Cooperation, Competition and Conflict. China is cognizant of India's growing economic heft and resolve to protect its core interests. Realpolitik on the part of China demands a tactical adjustment to steer relations with India to a manageable level so that the American challenge is mitigated.

South Asia / Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is virtually the centre of gravity of China's BRI. The successful completion of CPEC, China - Nepal Economic Corridor, China Myanmar Economic Corridor, Kyakphu port in the Bay of Bengal, Gwadar port in the Arabian Sea and critical infrastructure in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives (the Maritime Silk Road signatories) is bound to alter the strategic landscape of the region to China's advantage. India and China will compete for domination of resources, location and influence. Structural factors in the relationship suggest that Sino-Indian relations will be marked by intensified competition. There is

a widening gap in the Comprehensive National Power of India and China. Beijing is constantly gaining a competitive advantage in the strategic balance vis-a-vis New Delhi. We need to have a nuanced understanding of the new “modus vivendi” with China. We should be deft in our assertions to make China understand and heed India’s core interests and sensitivities. In the meanwhile, the window of heightened strategic brinkmanship between China and the US should be utilised to build capacities to reclaim influence in the strategic neighbourhood and acquire a favourable strategic posture vis-à-vis China. Concurrently, measures to build strategic trust, complementarities and interdependence with China must continue with dignity and sincerity. Finally, India must heed the Theodore Roosevelt maxim, “speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far”. For India, implies achieving credible deterrence and showing deft diplomacy in engaging China.