

Sino - Indian Relations : Impressions on a Visit to China

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In October 1992 the China Institute for International Strategic Studies (CISS) Beijing, invited a delegation of five members from the United Service Institution of India (USI) to visit China. This invitation was a fall-out of the visit of the Vice-President of the China Institute, Gen Chai Chengwen, to India during which he had been invited to speak to members of the USI. I was fortunate in being a part of this delegation. During our visits we held discussions with the CISS, with the National Defence University of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and also with the Beijing University. We visited some industrial units in Shanghai, Xian and the new city of Shenzhen. In Guangdong (old Canton) we visited the Regional Military Headquarters. The main idea of the Chinese seem to have been to show us the tremendous progress made by China ever since Deng Xiaoping had opened up their industry to foreign investors and liberalised on the economic front. From Communist centralised control they moved to a market economy, which they liked to call "Capitalism with Chinese characteristics".

In October 1995 the China Institute for International Strategic Studies again invited me and my deputy at the United Service Institution of India to visit China. This time our stay was for a shorter period and our visits were limited to Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen. We were also limited to holding discussions with the CISS and the Strategic Institute of their Defence University. On this visit instead of a meeting at Beijing University we held discussions with the Shanghai Institute of International Studies.

On this visit, on our way out, we halted for a few days in Bangkok where we were able to set up a discussion with the Institute of Security and International Studies at the Chulalongkorn University. This we found most useful as it gave us some idea of how the Thais, as one of the ASEAN countries and a neighbour of China, felt about their great neighbour.

I would like to first present some general impressions I formed about China from my two visits. This, I feel, will be a good back-drop to our

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consideration of Sino-Indian relations in which I will try to cover the gist of the discussions we had at the various Chinese Institutions.

During both my visits I could not but help being impressed by the tremendous economic progress China has made since Deng Xiaoping liberalised the economy and allowed private foreign investments. Ofcourse, this process which commenced in the early 1980s gave them almost a fifteen years' head start over India. Before my first visit to China I had heard a lot about the tremendous progress the country was making in the economic field and the unbelievable rates of their industrial growth and the increase in their GNP. I remember attending a talk on China given by Mr Robert MacNamara at the India International Centre in New Delhi, in which he had forecast that China would, by the turn of the century, be the second largest economy in the world and by A.D. 2010 its per capita income would reach the level of the present per-capita income of the UK. This was with the present population of 1,200 million, which China, with her tremendous effort at population control, hoped to bring down to around 600 million by the middle of the next century. Even though all these were mind-boggling statistics, I was certainly not prepared for the actual progress which was visible all around when we visited the country. It reminded me of Napoleon's forecast of what would happen when the "sleeping giant awoke".

It was a visit to the Great Wall which gave a good insight into the Chinese character, which we normally miss out. Here was a huge construction, the only artificial feature which is visible from the moon, a wall built over a length of over 1,500 miles and which took several hundred years to complete. Could there be a better example of the persistence of the Chinese people to achieve a goal they had set themselves irrespective of the time it takes. Of course the utility of this wall for keeping out invaders from the North is another matter.

The Communist regime continues, by and large, to be a one party dictatorship with its centralised control that had in the past built up-basic industries and infrastructure. It certainly helped to improve the lot of the poorer sections of the society, who had been exploited for years under the old feudal system. It helped to level the gap between the rich and the poor. These aspects are certainly visible on the streets and rural countryside. People look well fed and clothed and you do not see anywhere the abject poverty of ill fed and ill clad people that you see on the streets of our cities and in our villages. But somewhere along the line the system seems to have stopped delivering the goods. Mao's "great leap forward" with "backyard steel furnaces" was a disaster and resulted in a 'great leap backwards' and then the cultural revolution which started with "letting a thousand flowers bloom" brought chaos and terrible misery in its train to many innocent victims.

It was Deng Xiaoping, the great Survivor, who as General Secretary was removed and arrested during the Cultural Revolution and bounced back into the leadership to set China on the liberalisation process and thus the Communist economic system was transformed into a market economy which today appears no different from the 'Capitalist system'. Its so called "Chinese characteristics" are difficult to discern. But inspite of the economic liberalisation there has been no let up on the political system. The Communist Party still maintains a firm grip on the Government with its one party rule. This was best brought out by the firm action taken to suppress the Tiananmen upsurge.

Today, Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen are like any other European city. The Chinese industry has been expanding every year at unbelievable rates and their GNP has been increasing by leaps and bounds. Ofcourse, this resulted in a runaway inflation, which too has been brought under control. The new affluence is plainly visible especially in the coastal belt, where foreign investment has been pouring in. Since my last visit, three years back, vehicular traffic appeared to have trebled in these cities and the streams of cyclists had proportionately thinned out. Shops were brimming with all varieties of quality goods and there were any number of people who seemed to have the purchasing power to buy them. But then strict government rules prevent the movement of people from the poorer rural areas to these affluent economic zones, which is only possible to do under a dictatorial rule.

In every city we visited, new construction seemed to be coming up everywhere. In Shanghai, from the window of the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, we counted some 21 highrise buildings coming up. One point, which is of interest to us, is the pace at which constructions come up. Last time, we were taken to see a newly constructed bridge over the Hwang Phu River in Shanghai. I noticed the bridge was of the same design and size as the new Howrah Bridge over the River Hooghly in Calcutta. This bridge at Shanghai was completed in two years compared to over twenty years it took in Calcutta. Last time we saw that construction had just been started on doubling the four lane 31 km road from Beijing airport to the city. This time we drove over the newly completed portion of the road. We visited a government owned shipyard in Shanghai. With twenty thousand labour of which only five thousand were engineers and technicians, this shipyard builds between fifty to sixty ships each year. I wish we could say that the Vizag shipyard, which employs a quarter of this labour force, could produce fifteen ships each year. This is something worthwhile in their work culture and discipline, which we could well emulate.

During our discussions at the various Institutes they all agreed that though contacts between India and China had been maintained for over two

thousand years, there had never been any conflict between the two countries. They felt that the conflict of 1962 was an aberration and there was no reason for this situation to recur. All outstanding disputes between the two countries, they felt, could be peacefully resolved and there should be no requirement to resort to force. At each of the Institutes the following problems came up for discussion in some form :-

(a) *The border dispute.* It was generally agreed that by recognising the Line of Actual Control and by moving troops back from eyeball to eyeball contact, the two countries had, to a large measure, defused the tension in the border areas. Then the Joint Working Group that had been decided upon during Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China, had been meeting regularly and dealing with problems arising in the border areas. But all this had not yet solved the main problem between the two countries which was a settlement of the boundary question. They maintain that the MacMahon Line had no legal basis and had never been recognised by China. They felt that there was no hurry in settling this issue as they appreciated that time was required on both sides to build up a favourable public opinion to move away from the rigid stand that had been taken on the issue. But still, as Gen Chai Chengwen said, during our previous visit that we should not pass on this problem to the next generation.

(b) *His Holiness the Dalai Lama.* Chinese are concerned over India giving refuge to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. They accused India of encouraging agitation amongst the Tibetan refugees and helping the so called Tibetan government in exile to destabilize the Chinese position in Tibet, which was an autonomous region of China and duly recognised by the Government of India. On our part we had pointed out that the Dalai Lama had not been given any official encouragement by the Indian Govt.

(c) *The Kashmir Situation.* There appeared a new interest in the situation in Kashmir. Till now the Chinese view had sided with Pakistan. Recently the increasingly vocal demand for 'Azadi' by certain sections of the Kashmiri militants seems to have led to a change in the Chinese attitude. They expressed themselves vehemently against Azadi for the Kashmiris in any form. Besides, some foreign elements being able to entrench themselves in an Azad Kashmir, such an event could have a chain reaction adverse to Chinese interests in this region. During our discussions the Chinese view expressed was that Kashmir was a bilateral problem between India and Pakistan which should be solved peacefully under the terms of the Simla agreement, but independence for Kashmir should be ruled out.

(d) *Expansion of the UN Security Council.* In discussions on this subject at the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, they felt that certain principles about the expansion of the Council and the inclusion of new permanent members needed to be formulated. They were of the opinion that countries of Africa and South America, which had no representation in the Council, should be given preference. On this basis they felt that probably Egypt and Brazil had strong claims. Asked about the Chinese support for India's claim to a permanent seat they agreed that a country of India's size and potential should be included but it appeared that the Chinese position on this had yet to be formulated.

Overall view that was expressed over and over again was that China's main aim in the foreseeable future was to improve the economic lot of their people and to catch up with the Western economies. For this reason they wished to avoid any confrontation which detracts from their developmental activities. There was no mention of Taiwan, Vietnam or Spratly Islands. When faced with the query about their attempts to gain entry to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar, they vehemently denied this. They said that this was a part of Western propaganda to show up China having imperialistic designs.

The Chinese justified their peaceful intentions by pointing to their comparatively small Defence budget which they claimed to be only 7.5 billion US dollars. They also brought up the reduction of one million men in the Army. They did not, however, bring up the various other methods that were being used to maintain a three million Army on a budget the Indian Army found difficult to maintain a one million strong force. These points are now all reflected in the White Paper on Defence that the Chinese government has recently brought out.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that China's main objective is to catch up in the economic field with the West. To do this, they have liberalised on the economic side and gone on to a market economy with very good results. But unlike the former Soviet Union, they have kept a strict hold on the political side, in which there has been no relaxation. The Communist Party with its one party rule has maintained a very firm grip on the Governmental apparatus. Though China repeatedly professes peaceful intentions, its Middle Kingdom syndrome seems to, at times, show up as in its recent claim on Spratly Islands and its tantrums over the visit of the Taiwanese President to the USA. For India it is certainly important to come to a fair settlement of the long outstanding boundary problem. India also needs to be watchful of the Chinese activities in Myanmar and its efforts to gain entry into the Indian Ocean through that country.