

China-India Strategic Dialogue: Problems and Prospects

Dr Bhartendu Kumar Singh^{*}

Introduction

If strategic dialogue is a painful process in international relations that yields little in terms of tangible outcomes, China and India are noteworthy examples. As the two countries resumed their strategic dialogue after a hiatus of three years recently (in New Delhi on 20th August), there was little expectation of an immediate outcome. The fifth round may have resurrected the fossilised dialogue process and may give a new lease of life to Sino-Indian relations that have been suffering from strategic impasse for quite some time, but the new investment needs comprehensive support if it is to facilitate the resolution of core conflicts in the bilateral relations.

A Euphoric Beginning

The contextual environment was harmonious and conducive when China and India inaugurated their first-ever strategic dialogue in January 2005 at New Delhi. The two countries had signed a landmark declaration in June 2003 during the then Indian Prime Minister AB Vajpayee's visit to China on 'Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation'. In addition, they also concluded a border trade protocol between India's Sikkim province and Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China. The protocol signalled China's recognition of Sikkim as part of India. Most importantly, the two countries appointed Special Representatives (SRs) to explore the framework of a boundary settlement.¹ Subsequently, the new Indian leadership under Dr Manmohan Singh was quite willing to carry forward the good work of previous government.

The logic of a dedicated China-India strategic dialogue was necessitated for several reasons. *First*, despite a marked improvement in the overall bilateral relations, India's security dilemma vis-à-vis China remained complicated. The border talks were in stalemate; China's military modernisation was quite visible near Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India; and above all, the

^{*}Dr Bhartendu Kumar Singh is from the Indian Defence Accounts Service and is presently posted as Joint Controller of Defence Accounts (Air Force), Subroto Park, New Delhi. He is a PhD in Chinese Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Sino-Pak military and nuclear cooperation had confirmed India's 'two-front' threat perceptions. India needed, therefore, a dedicated dialogue platform to discuss such issues with China from a realistic perspective. *Second*, as rising great powers, China and India had also enough stakes in the fashioning of regional and global order. While there was huge potential for cooperation, no diplomatic platform existed to discuss the cooperative ventures in seclusion. *Third*, this was also the period when India was seeking specialised dialogue platforms to discuss special issues with China. The strategic dialogue was just one of them; subsequently, there were institutionalised dialogues on financial matters and defence issues.

Gains from the Earlier Rounds of Strategic Dialogue

It would be naïve to say that strategic dialogue alone led to progress in the bilateral relations since there were other dialogue platforms and engagement tools between the two countries. Since 2005, a series of positive developments took place in the bilateral relationship that could be attributed to these dialogue platforms. *First*, India was able to convey its concerns on Sino-Pak military cooperation and, today, it is relatively less hyped about the axis than a decade back. China has also got similar assurances about the non-political nature of the Tibetan movement in India. The larger success for Indian foreign policy establishment also lay in reduced tone and tenor of China on issues concerning India. India's missile programme, for example, today does not generate reactive Chinese response. *Second*, the two sides made some concrete move on the border issue. In April 2005, an agreement was signed on 'political parameters and guiding principles on the boundary question. The agreement generated some optimism about a resolution of the border issue since the two countries had moved beyond historical issues to political principles (like not disturbing settled populations). *Third*, the two sides also pledged a move from strategic rivalry to one of 'strategic partnership'. In 2005, for example, the two sides issued a joint statement establishing a strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity. It reflected the consensus that bilateral relations transcended bilateral issues and acquired global and strategic perspective. When Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh visited China in January 2008, a joint statement was issued on 'a shared vision for the 21st century of India and China', outlining common positions on numerous international issues.

Explaining the Pause in Strategic Dialogue

While the first strategic dialogue was held in January 2005, the second took place a year later in January 2006. The third round was almost two years later in December 2007. The fourth round was held after an interregnum of three years in November 2010 and so was the fifth round. Thus, it would be fair to conclude that the dialogue process that was supposed to be an annual exercise slowly got derailed! The lull in the frequency and periodicity of strategic dialogue was due to several reasons. *First*, there was a general decay in overall bilateral relations. As Professor C Raja Mohan explains, 'India's continued efforts to build a partnership couldn't prevail over the logic of conflict'.² Sino-Indian relations (have) reverted to the mode of conflict and rivalry amid renewed border tensions, differences over Tibet, nuclear politics and a range of other issues that divided them in the 20th century'.³ *Second*, China's military modernisation and its transformation from a continental power to a maritime power (it launched an aircraft carrier during this period) also contributed to its reduced interest in the dialogue process. China was more interested in consolidating the 'strategic encirclement' and enhancing the security dilemma of India. *Third*, the clamour for 'Chindia', the new strategic version of the romanticised version of 'Hindi-Chini bhai bhai (Indians and Chinese are brothers)' of fifties had cooled down due to ground realities. Concurrently, the hype and hoopla in the Sino-Indian relations in early 21st century due to buoyancy in political and economic relations had also come down considerably. *Fourth*, during this period, there was a comprehensive decline in the dialogue processes between the two countries across the spectrum. The annual defence dialogue had equally suffered and the strategic economic dialogue was faltering in the wake of widening trade deficits. The pause in the strategic dialogue was, therefore, part of the larger communication breakdown between China and India.

Inferences from the 5th Round of Strategic Dialogue

The fifth round of strategic dialogue was convened when the bilateral atmospherics had been vitiated few months back by PLA intrusion across LAC into India's Ladakh area. Notwithstanding a new leadership in Beijing and the visit of the new Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to New Delhi soon after, there was an induced trust deficit in the bilateral relationship. The strategic dialogue, like in past, provided an opportunity to discuss mutual concerns in an

informal, free and frank manner. Apart from the hot topics of bilateral concerns like utilisation of trans-border river waters, trade deficit and ways of maintaining peace and tranquility across the LAC in the India–China border areas, the two sides also discussed issues related to BRICS, security architecture in Asia-Pacific region and the outlook for Afghanistan in 2014. The latter two are issues where the two countries are holding opposite perspectives. China, for example, is opposed to US' self-declared role as 'pivot' whereas India does not find it detrimental to security in Asia-Pacific. Similarly, on Afghanistan, where both countries initiated a separate dedicated dialogue process recently, there remained perceptual differences about the arrangement of post-US Afghanistan.⁴ China prefers a bigger role for Pakistan much to the chagrin of India. The reconstruction of strategic dialogue was an indication that India wanted to narrow down the differences with China on such issues.

Strategic Dialogue: Prospects

The strategic dialogue process may have resumed, but there are ample reasons to conclude that it will not have a smooth ride in future. *First*, the conflictual trend in Sino–Indian relations will continue for foreseeable future, including the core issue of border dispute that is not likely to be resolved for considerable time. The basket of differences is expanding and proliferating to other issues. In fact, whispers of Sino-Indian conflict have even been heard on international platforms (like the Asian Development Bank where China tried to block a loan for India, albeit unsuccessfully). *Second*, China is increasingly being perceived as 'number one threat' in India's strategic circles. China's military modernisation and logistical development near LAC with India add weight to perceptions that China is looking for a military solution of the border dispute than explore diplomatic solutions. *Third*, both countries are undergoing power transition. As rising great powers, they are bound to have enough conflict issues on plate, more so since they are neighbours. It is debatable if strategic dialogue could be of much use in mitigating this 'conflict of great powers' despite the charm offensive in some strategic corners that there is enough geo-political space for the two countries to co-exist. *Fourth*, the power gap between China and India is widening and this might make the strategic dialogue platform meaningless where China would dictate terms of dialogue and still play political chicanery outside the platform. The best evidence of this proposition is Chinese perception of India as

a 'sub-regional power'. *Fifth*, both China and India have fundamental differences in their respective worldview despite some political noises of similarity on bilateral and multilateral platforms. As a recent study concludes, 'Sino-Indian differences are considerable on issues relating to global order, non-proliferation system, Asian security, regional stability in Southern Asia, security in the maritime commons, space and cyberspace even though those differences may not always be apparent in public discussions'.⁵ It is debatable if India can use the strategic dialogue process to forge a consensus view with China on major themes of Asian security.

Strategic Dialogue: Choosing a Realistic Milestone

Eight years ago, the strategic dialogue had started with much fanfare and a huge expectational basket. China and India had hoped to use this platform to forge a strategic partnership in international affairs. That would have been a really good development since both carry reasonable clout in the emerging international world order and together they can design constructive Asian security architecture. However, given the inherent contradictions in Sino-Indian relations, 'strategic partnership' between them would always remain a distant milestone. Moreover, 'strategic partnerships call for greater engagement between the parties than mere ad hoc bilateral relationships'.⁶ Such higher level of engagement is simply not possible between China and India, despite the existence of romanticised joint declarations, agreements and proliferation of numerous dialogue platforms. India cannot expect to develop a relation with China equivalent to Sino-Russian or Sino-Pak relations.

In order to make the dialogue meaningful, therefore, a realist, minimalist and achievable target of 'strategic understanding' is desirable instead of the so-called 'strategic partnership' for various reasons. *First*, it would be less ambitious, would cater for exclusive agendas in international relations and Asian security, would accept the differences China and India have with each other and above all, perpetuate the 'cold peace' between the two countries through institutionalized 'conflict management'. *Second*, it would also allow the two countries to continue with respective strategic partnerships (like Sino-Pak or Indo-US relationships) without being bitterly critical of each other and at the same time allow space for issue-based cooperation without compromising the bilateral rivalry. *Third*, it would enable bilateral relations to remain manageable without any conflict escalation, the foremost prerequisite for Indian foreign policy.

Conclusion

As a recent document on India's foreign policy puts it, 'China will, for the foreseeable future, remain a significant foreign policy and security challenge for India. It is the 'one' major power which impinges directly on India's geopolitical space'.⁷ The future of Sino – Indian relations is, therefore, fraught with uncertainties. India is also a weaker power and has 'resource constraints' in bridging the power gap with China, not to mention its lack of capacity to 'shape the rules' in the emerging global order.⁸ India does not choose balancing or bandwagoning as standard foreign policy options and, therefore, the Chinese 'challenge has to be met without confrontation or appeasement'.⁹ **Therefore, from an Indian perspective, more investment in strategic dialogue is the only option despite the pangs of expectational frustration in the past.** India should seek regular dialogues apart from enhancing its economic and military profile to thwart Chinese power games and military adventures. Perhaps, that is the best way to engage China and bring down the flux in bilateral relationships.

Endnotes

1. Embassy of India, 'India–China Bilateral Relations: Political Relations', <http://www.indianembassy.org.cn/DynamicContent.aspx?MenuId=2&SubMenuId=0> Accessed on 26th August 2013.
2. C Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2013), p. 14.
3. *Ibid*, p.16.
4. 'With an eye on NATO pullout, India, China hold dialogue on Afghanistan', *The Hindu* (New Delhi) 19 Apr 2013.
5. Ashley J Tellis and Sean Mirski, 'Introduction', in Ashley J Tellis and Sean Mirski (eds), *Crux of Asia: China, India and the Emerging Global Order* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; 2013), 41
6. Vidya Nadkarni, *Strategic Partnerships in Asia: Balancing Without Alliances* (New York: Routledge; 2010), p.49.
7. 'Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century', Center for Policy Research (New Delhi; 2012), p.13.
8. For elaboration of this proposition, see, Wahepal Singh Sidhu, Pratap Bhanu Mehta and Bruce Jones (eds), *Shaping the Emerging World: India and the Multilateral Order* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution; 2013), pp. 3-24.
9. Kanwal Sibal, 'India-China Relations: Problems and Prospects', *Air Power Journal*, Vol 7, No 3 (July-September 2012), pp. 1-26.