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China-India Talks: Markers for the ‘Marathon’

There has been no breakthrough in the on-going negotiations to resolve the long-simmering China-India boundary dispute. The Sino-Indian meetings in April 2016 have, nonetheless, resulted in a clarification of the way ahead for the first time since Mr Narendra Modi became India’s Prime Minister in 2014.

P S Suryanarayana¹

India and China have once again messaged to each other that they will continue to pursue a possibly marathon dialogue in the absence of a dramatic breakthrough. These sentiments have now been voiced in a more-immediate emerging context – China is preparing to host a G20 summit (a meeting of 20 established and emerging economic powers) later this year, and India too is ready to host in 2016 itself a summit of the BRICS forum (which consists of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Both China and India are also members of G20, albeit at two different echelons as emerging economies.

Let us, first, look at the sequence of the latest Sino-Indian meetings. India’s Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar met his Chinese counterpart Chang Wanquan in Beijing on 18 April, while Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held talks with India’s External Affairs Minister Sushma

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Swaraj in Moscow on the same day. The two foreign ministers conferred at, and on the margins of, a ministerial meeting of the Russia-India-China (RIC) forum. Beijing's preferred political terminology is China-Russia-India (CRI) forum, in line with the Chinese sense of relative importance of these three countries. On 19 April, Mr Parrikar called on Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in Beijing. India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, in his capacity as the country's Special Representative for Talks on the China-India Boundary Question, met Chinese State Councillor and Special Representative Yang Jiechi, in Beijing on 20 April, besides calling on Mr Li on the following day. What does such a slate of dense high-level meetings convey? The slate reveals some basic realities and subtle nuances.

One, the two foreign ministers, as evident from an authoritative statement from the Chinese side, have reaffirmed the first principles of goodwill and good behaviour between the two countries.² From New Delhi's standpoint, Ms Swaraj also reminded China (and Russia in the RIC forum) that "India's permanent membership of the [United Nations] Security Council is long overdue and this anomaly needs urgent rectification".³ It is well-known, though, that Beijing, desirous of retaining its current pre-eminent position as Asia's only Permanent Member of the elite UN Security Council, is not amused at India's push to rub shoulders with China on the global stage. In effect, the latest Wang Yi-Sushma meeting proved to be one more exercise in adhering to the standard operating procedure of stating positions under the rubric of institutionalised diplomacy of the early-21st Century.

Cool Talk about a Hotline

Two, the latest Sino-Indian meeting of defence ministers has been marginally more important, given the relatively scarce talks at this level. Following the Chang-Parrikar meeting, it was announced that "China [has] reacted positively toward setting up a military hotline with India on border security".⁴ Arguably, this consensus might set the stage for the actual activation of a long-discussed Sino-Indian military hotline. A safeguarded telecommunication link is meant, primarily, to prevent tensions along the disputed Sino-Indian frontier from flaring up into lethal conflict. The two sides have indeed learnt, over the years, to 'localise' such tensions so as to

² http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1357011.shtml (accessed 22/4/2016)

³ http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/26627/Media_Statement_by_Ext... (accessed 22/4/2016)

⁴ http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2016-04/18/content_4649823.htm (accessed 20/4/2016)

avoid a conflagration. So, the spirit behind the latest Sino-Indian consensus about a hotline can prove useful in other ways too. China is curious to know how far New Delhi would allow the United States to access and/or reinforce India's military facilities in a manner that might threaten China's interests.⁵ US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter's visit to India, ahead of Mr Parrikar's journey to China, accentuated these Chinese concerns. Significantly, Mr Li has, while speaking to Mr Parrikar, expressed the "hope" that the two sides could "jointly maintain peace and stability" along their contested border.⁶ Although pious platitudes *prima facie*, their importance lies in the potential consequence of their breach.

Three, Mr Doval's meetings in Beijing at this time have led to some markers being put in place for the eventual resolution of the Sino-Indian boundary dispute. This has been done for the first time since Mr Narendra Modi, espousing intense nationalism, became Prime Minister in 2014. Four significant strands are evident from the Chinese official version. First, in this sub-context, the two Special Representatives "agreed" that China and India "will ... stay on the track of political settlement", the search for which began in 2003. Secondly, the two sides "will ...continue to promote the process of framework negotiation". The ongoing quest for a "framework solution" is designed to help delineate the to-be-agreed boundary on the maps and demarcate the actual frontier along the treacherous Himalayan terrain. Thirdly, it is now agreed that the two countries "will" proceed on "the basis of [the] existing results from [19 rounds of] negotiations" including the latest one. Fourthly in this sub-context, China and India "will ...meet each other halfway". This implies a compromise settlement.⁷

Politics Trumps Diplomacy

A seasoned Chinese diplomat, with privileged access to the results of these border talks, communicated to me in 2014 (before Mr Modi became Prime Minister) that the two countries had, by the end of the 17th round itself, "reached some preliminary consensus on a solution framework".⁸ In 2016, a veteran Indian diplomat of yesteryear, as well as a high-ranking serving Indian official, have indicated to me that the key factor still holding up a final accord

⁵ Author's conversations with Chinese and Indian diplomats in April 2016

⁶ http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2016-04/19/content_4649980.htm (accessed 20/4/2016)

⁷ http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1357623.shtml (accessed 22/4/2016)

⁸ P S Suryanarayana, *Smart Diplomacy: Exploring China-India Synergy*, World Century, Hackensack, New Jersey (US), 2016, pp. 272 and 277

is the absence of political will on both sides to accept the inevitability of redrawing the maps of the two countries. More significantly in this context, a Chinese diplomat, who knows India well, is of the view that the primary hurdle to a better Sino-Indian relationship is the “trust deficit” rather than the pending boundary settlement.⁹ This is true: the circular nature of the current Sino-Indian engagement can be traced to the trust deficit that does not allow a settlement, the absence of which does, in turn, fortify the deficit.

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⁹ These citations, not attributed to sources by their names, are derived from the author’s conversations with Chinese and Indian diplomats in 2016.