

# ***Wanted: A 'Shadow of the Future'\* on India-China Relations***

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Ever since the end of the Cold War there is a general perception that the international system is no longer shaped by ideological and militaristic rivalries. The concept of 'security' is also now said to include concerns about economic security, a shift from 'geopolitics' to 'geoeconomics.' While the economic and commercial dimension is an important part of bilateral relations, due to our twentieth century history, it will not be enough to improve ties with China beyond a point. The need is to perceive bilateral relations in the 'shadow of the future'. In other words, long-term thinking on the part of policy actors is crucial in the process of exploring the means to achieve higher positive outcomes and relatively permanent benefits in bilateral and multilateral relations even if it means foregoing some temporary benefits in the short to medium term. Quincy Wright, noted international theorist, said 'increased trade relations leads to commercial retaliation and economic blockades. If political relations are unquestioned, economic inter-dependence may increase friendliness'. Admittedly our bilateral trade and economic ties are growing by the day, but these ties are far from being closely inter dependent. As trade increases (US \$18 billion in the first nine-months of 2006) both countries will sooner than later, be challenged with the questions that are 'political'. The political differences may temporarily be placed on the back burner but the heat, albeit indirect and less intense, is still on and is bound to affect commercial interests. Just prior to President Hu Jintao's visit, much debate was generated on the reasons underlying the Indian establishment's reluctance to accept Chinese commercial interests in certain areas. For Indian business as well, not all sectors are open on the Chinese mainland. When the political equation is still unsettled, economic and commercial angularities will soon show.

The Chinese foreign policy in the post-Cold War era has been summed up neatly by scholars like Wu Baiyi and others who opine that China (in the post-Cold War era) has moved from 'security of existence' to 'security of sustained development'.

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\*Borrowed from Kenneth Oye, 'Co-operation Under Anarchy'.

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The foreign policy of China is based on a perception of international security based on respect and regard for political, economic and cultural pluralism of other countries. Further, mutual interest and economic prosperity are achieved when international security leads to sustained and increased support including facilitating pragmatic solutions to existing disputes and conflicts. This is a far cry from the Maoist era where 'politics (was) in command'. Economic security has become an important subsidiary of national security, given that the engine of China's stupendous growth is international trade.

The Indian foreign policy has also witnessed a marked change in the sense that its foreign policy has moved from preoccupation with regional matters to an increasing focus on economic development which has led to shifts such as the 'look east' policy, improvement of relations with countries like the US to get more foreign direct investment and more crucially, break out of the nuclear straitjacket. India's security considerations are being shaped by the search of three major goals, namely, (a) make foreign policy conducive to the overall success of its economic reforms and enhance its economic security, (b) improve relations with major players in the international arena, and (c) overall improvement of its internal security situation.

Based on their respective foreign policy goals and objectives, India-China relations should be on the rise because better ties will undoubtedly promote the realisation of their overall foreign policy goals and objectives but in reality somehow the potential has not been actualised. China does not perceive India as a very important actor by itself, but only as a significant actor in a multilateral international system. Such a system will, for the Chinese, lead to a situation characterised by 'checks and balances' with great powers keeping each other in check and therefore providing China greater manoeuvring space to realise its strategic goals and objectives. This policy termed as 'containment without confrontation' can be achieved in many ways and Sino-Indian relations fits into this. It is worth noting that in his January 2001 visit to India, the then Chairman of China's National People's Congress, Li Peng, referred to India as one of the poles in a multi-polar world. What he meant was that India is a significant player in this 'containment without confrontation' policy. Second, China does not consider India as a 'great power' because it believes that India lacks—*zonghe guoli youshi*—that is, comprehensive national strength. According to scholars like Liu Junkun and Hua Di, India falls short of the Chinese qualifications of a great power because it is still unable to demonstrate strong economic performance and is saddled with a weak economic system. China believes that India can be useful in those areas where China as well stands on a weak ground, namely, issues like human rights, multi-lateral negotiations like in the Doha Round, G20 and environmental questions. India also holds an attraction as an expanding market and a threat as the bigger global player in the emerging information technology and not an insignificant source of some raw materials. India's perceptions are not very optimistic as well. Defence planners and sections of policy-makers including bureaucrats and academics are sceptical of India improving

its ties with China which is on the verge of attaining great power status. India feels that China has failed to appreciate the security concerns of India especially due to cross-border terrorism. China's systematic negation of India's world power ambition in the UN system or outside is not missed by many either.

Both sides need each other if they are to realise their short-to medium-term goals. Despite a trust deficit there has been movement, suggested by the 'strategic partnership' during Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Delhi in 2005. However, a lot more needs to be done and bilateral relations must be taken to a higher plane. Political leadership on both sides should develop a farsighted view beyond the horizon and keeping in mind the 'shadow of the future'. This will give both the sides new and more important reasons to cooperate.

There is no dearth of the likely areas of cooperation. Both are developing countries with near identical problems. In the domestic sphere, health, education, energy, food security, low per capita income, regional imbalances and unequal distribution of wealth, efficient utilisation of available resources and issues of environmental concerns are obvious starting points on which expertise can be shared.

On the world stage, as they progress economically, China and India have already come up against stiff resistance from the developed world on a variety of issues where there is a clash of interests. The North is setting the international political and economic agenda with little regard to the developing world's views on human rights, the environment and access to technology. In such eventuality the West is bound to see an incentive in perpetuating differences between the two big Asian neighbours. Both countries will be well served with some sort of a coalition, in tandem with other countries facing similar challenges, as neither will be strong enough to meet the western challenges alone.

Goh Chek Tong, Singapore's leader said once, 'As China and India grow, they will inevitably loom larger on each other's radar screens, economic growth will give Beijing and Delhi the resources to pursue wider strategic interests across the Asian continent.' Till now many subscribe to this view that economic ties will gradually lead to overall improvement of ties but economic ties can take bilateral relations only up to a point. After that, it needs political will and maturity to take bilateral relations to a higher plane and this is bound not to happen till the 'shadow of the future' is a missing ingredient in bilateral ties.