

Chinese Premier Wen's visit: *An opportunity missed*

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Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's recent visit to New Delhi once again served to highlight the fractious nature of the relations between the two giant Asian neighbors and rising global powers. Other than signing a slew of business deals, worth \$16 billion, the two sides failed to produce any significant breakthroughs, or even modest advances, on the diplomatic front during the high-level bilateral trip.

Not that any key strategic deal was expected while Wen was in India, given the state of their relations, which for the past six decades have been characterized by a lack of mutual trust and understanding.

In fact, on the eve of his premier's visit, China's ambassador to India, Zhang Yan, had given a fairly accurate summary of the ties. Speaking with a candor that is not normally associated with top diplomats, he termed the Sino-Indian ties as "very fragile and easy to be damaged and difficult to repair."

Wen landed in Delhi at a time the chasm in Sino-Indian ties was as wide as it has been in a long time. India had been incensed by a Chinese foreign ministry decision, earlier this year, to issue separate visas to Indian citizens from Arunachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir—the former a territory that China claims as its part and the latter a region India and Pakistan have been at loggerheads with ever since they both became independent in 1947.

India cannot be faulted if it perceives the visa move as a challenge to its sovereignty over these two states. Even though New Delhi wanted an assurance from Beijing that it would abandon the new visa policy during the visit, the Chinese weren't very eager to please the hosts.

New Delhi, on its part, refused to reiterate the country's support for "One-China" policy—the principle that there is only one China and

Taiwan is part of that—in the joint statement issued at the end of the visit. In the past, such a commitment has been customary in official communiqués during bilateral visits.

In addition to the visa issue, scant progress was made in resolving their big differences, which have been weighing down their relations, including border disputes that predates India's independence from Great Britain in 1947 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

China questions the legality of India's control of Arunachal Pradesh, which became part of the British India following a 1914 treaty it signed with Tibet. Another key territorial dispute is over Aksai Chin, now under Chinese control now, but India claims it as part of its state of Jammu and Kashmir.

On both of these disputes, the two countries have agreed to respect what they call the Line of Actual Control, the de facto border. However, without a permanent resolution to the border disputes, warming of relations is highly unlikely.

China's biggest gripe against India, over the decades, has been India's support for the Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama, who has been living in exile in India since 1959, when he fled Tibet following a failed rebellion there.

China's backing of Pakistan is another big irritant in Sino-Indian ties. Historically, both China and Pakistan have used each other as a counterweight to India in the neighborhood. That strategy and Beijing's huge military aid to Islamabad and its help in building nuclear infrastructure are seen by New Delhi as a direct threat to it.

China and Pakistan are in the process of concluding a civil nuclear agreement similar to the one India signed with the United States in 2008. Once completed the deal would allow China to supply nuclear reactors to Pakistan to meet the latter's energy needs. There is a

concern in India, which is shared by the West, that the cooperation might not be limited to the civilian nuclear space.

Apart from these three issues, a fourth front of discord was opened in recent years. China's attempts to divert waters of rivers originating in the Tibetan Plateau, including that of Brahmaputra, has alarmed India and another neighbor, Bangladesh. Building of dams on the river, which is also called Tsangpo-Brahmaputra, in upper riparian areas in Tibet will reduce the flow of water to the northeastern part of India and Bangladesh, where the river is a lifeline for tens of millions of people.

Even on bilateral trade, the one area where their cooperation has increased manifold in the past decade, there is a growing concern in India that China is benefiting more from the trade than India. Currently, India's trade imbalance with China is roughly \$20 billion. Another emerging view in India is that China is focusing all its energy on boosting economic relations with India, and not making any effort to solve territorial disputes and other differences as a strategic ploy.

On India's campaign to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China was reluctant to give a full endorsement during the premier's trip. One of the few quantifiable gains of the visit was the opening of a hotline between him and Prime Minister Singh.

That very little progress was made on any of the contentious issues during the visit was quite disappointing. High-level trips such as the one the premier undertook are not everyday occurrences.

What's more, they even seemed to have taken a step back, when one compares this visit to the Chinese leader's previous trip to Delhi in April 2005. During that trip, the two nations had signed a series of agreements to address the various bilateral disagreements. That visit also

triggered the two-way trade, which now stands at \$60 billion.

For now, it appears the uneasy coexistence, which has been the hallmark of their relations for the past several decades, will continue to define the India-China ties. There are many reasons why status quo-being indifferent to each other and stalemate on contentious issues—is not good for both countries, which share a 2,100-mile border, which is slightly longer than the U.S.-Mexico border and six and a half times bigger than the one China and Pakistan have.

With both nations firmly on the path to becoming major global powers—China has already become one by most definitions—Sino-Indian ties have significance beyond Asia. Indifference to each and, what's worse, hostility, even if it is a low-level one, will be damaging for both economies, as they will hamper bilateral trade, which is expected to reach \$100 billion in the next five years.

Already the world is watching with trepidation as India and China are competing in other parts of the world, especially Africa, for energy and other natural resources to feed their economies that are growing at break-neck speed. For thousands of years, the dragon and the elephant lived without any apparent enmity. Now, for the sake of the world, and for their own people, the two need to mend their fences.

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