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Revue libertaire internationale en ligne
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Nous sommes définis par les lignes que nous décidons de traverser ou d'accepter comme frontières

Surjit Mansingh

The chindia project

- Archives - Archives Générales 2006 - 2022 - 2009 - Avril, April 2009 No. 14 - English - International - India -

Date de mise en ligne : Thursday 16 April 2009

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India and China, China and India, the phrase slips off the pages of books, financial reports, intelligence estimates, journals, as if the two Asian giants were twins demanding comparison. Some similarities are striking, such as the continuity, extent, length and wealth of their ancient civilizations, their large populations of over one billion each, their emergence in the mid-1940s from foreign domination, their aspirations to sit at the high table of international decision-making, and their positions as the fastest growing economies in a world showing a discernible power shift from West to East. Thus, Western writers frequently compare India and China, though few know and understand both large and complex countries equally well and most are naturally concerned with how the rise of China or India might affect Western (or specifically American) commercial and strategic interests. For many historical reasons, Americans know and respect China more than they do India and their economic and other interchanges with the former are much more extensive and deep, amounting to interdependence, than with the latter. For that very reason, perhaps, the recent rise of India is seen more as an opportunity for the United States to establish broad cooperation on the basis of shared values rather than a possible threat. In contrast, the prospect of China gaining economic parity with the United States before mid-century, modernising all aspects of its defence, scientific and space establishments with huge increases of expenditure, and greatly expanding its maritime reach, sets alarm bells ringing in some quarters. Will a ‘Beijing consensus’ replace the ‘Washington consensus’ that appeared to fail in 2008? Can China become a reliable stakeholder in a Western dominated international system? Is conflict inevitable between the hegemonic power and a rising global power, as the past might indicate? US-China relations are rightly regarded as pivotal to international peace and security.

Dissimilarities between India and China are many. China has three times the area of India and its economy is thrice as large. China is a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council and has blocked passage of India (and Japan) to that prestigious position. The two countries have different political systems, for which the terms ‘liberal democracy’ and ‘communist autocracy’ applied respectively to India and China are accurate but inadequate gauges. At the heart lie different concepts of the state, the role of government, and individual freedom in historical memory and contemporary practice. Though both Asian subcontinents have seen empires built and fall apart, with regular migrations and invasions by outsiders, the results are not the same. And while both modern governments play important roles in the lives and livelihoods of their people, public perceptions of their efficacy are quite different. A remark commonly heard of late is “China has done well because of its government; India is doing well in spite of its government.”

China’s historical memory and self-representation highlights the Han people (presently comprising 95 per cent of the total population) and the centrality of a unified state. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) established the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 as a result of victory in a civil war. Supreme leader Mao Zedong created a ‘hard state’ that will not tolerate opposition or dissent, that levelled social hierarchies, and abolished private property but also provided education and an ‘iron rice bowl’ to the population. Ideological fervour in the Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution resulted in unimaginable suffering and millions of unnecessary deaths, but out of that harm came good in the form of Deng Xiaoping’s comprehensive modernisation program through agricultural reforms, progressive adoption of market economics, a draconian ‘one child’ policy of population control, an open door to foreign direct investment, and countrywide exhortation to become rich. The state can and does take credit for China’s phenomenal economic growth over 25 years that has produced dazzling infrastructure, factories to supply the world with consumer goods of all kinds, and a voracious import market for natural resources. China is now the world’s third largest economy with the largest holding of foreign reserves in dollars.

The CCP has legitimised its monopoly of political power by rising prosperity in the eastern coastal provinces and development projects for the inland western provinces. It has co-opted the new capitalists in Hu Jintao’s projection of ‘Harmonious Society’. The CCP now faces the more difficult task of coping with rising social unrest as the world economic crisis results in higher unemployment, the return to rural areas of tens of millions of migrant workers from cites, and slower economic growth because of sharp decline in exports. The CCP leadership is also fending off

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demands to end its monopoly and permit democratisation so powerfully articulated in Charter 08, and disciplining those who sign the electronically circulated Charter with interrogations, detentions, and worse. It attempts to censor and control a feisty and expanding blogosphere with limited success. Any crack in the carapace presents an existential challenge to a hard state, and 2009 is expected to be a difficult year with anniversaries of several historic events. If China does democratise in response to public demand, it is bound to do so ‘with Chinese characteristics.’

India’s historical memory and self-representation has focused less on the state than on a stable society and the spiritual liberation of the individual. The multiplicity of ethnicities, languages, political parties and religions in India exceeds that of any other country in the world. Pluralism (also termed secularism in India) is both fact and aspiration together, and is constitutionally guaranteed. A tightly centralised state is almost inconceivable in these conditions. Moreover, a uniquely non-violent Indian national movement led by M.K. Gandhi grew out of social reform movements seeking to redress entrenched social injustices through moral transformation. Reformist legislation passed after independence also relies on voluntarism rather than state sanction. The same is true of India’s family planning programs, with only one short-lived effort at coercive population control made in 1975-76. As a result, fertility rates have fallen in the dynamic and relatively prosperous southern and western states while remaining high in the poor and backward states of the Ganges valley. While poverty reduction in India has been significant in terms of percentages, it is less dramatic than China’s poverty reduction in terms of numbers living at subsistence level. And India’s immediate neighbours, particularly Bangladesh and Nepal, have higher fertility rates and poverty levels than India so that there is a constant influx of people across virtually open land borders.

The Republic of India is a federation in which responsibility for key elements of governance, including those in which India lags behind China, such as agriculture, education and law and order, rests with the States rather than the Union. Administrative and economic performance varies widely among States but some problems are common to a greater or lesser degree. One is the gap between admirable analyses and well-drafted laws on the one hand, and on the other hand their implementation (or not) by an increasingly discredited bureaucracy. Another problem is the complexity of legal provisions protecting labour rights and fundamental rights of the individual, including ownership of property, combined with a lack of political consensus on the means and even the goals of economic development. Many potential foreign and domestic investors are consequently deterred from manufacturing industries or infrastructure construction. Land acquisition is almost invariably a prolonged and painful process. Therefore it is impossible, as Tarun Khanna puts it in his detailed account of Indian and Chinese entrepreneurship, for Mumbai to be a Shanghai. At the same time, Indian corporate management and the Reserve Bank of India’s prudence and probity command international respect. And pragmatic, forward looking Indian entrepreneurs excel in knowledge-based industries of software services, pharmaceuticals, health care, biotechnology and specialised manufactures.

Many Indians vocally resent what they call a ‘democracy tax’ in inefficiency and deplore India’s ‘soft state’ appellation. Criticism of India is a national pastime and carries no penalty. But the vast majority of Indians are grateful to the framers of the Constitution for providing adult franchise and other institutions of representative democracy. The populous lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder, women, and minority populations have been visibly empowered through affirmative action, the right to vote governments in and out of office, formation or influence in political parties to further their own interests, and administrative adjustments allowing for autonomy. Redress of entrenched social injustices flow from empowerment, not fiat. Governments may come and go, coalitions can be formed or broken, elections are always tumultuous, but India’s political system probably is stable and predictable.

Some complementarities between Chinese and Indian economic capabilities are evident. As Premier Zhu Rongji said in Bangalore in 2002, the combination of Chinese hardware and Indian software would be irresistible to the global market. Leading companies in the two countries have launched joint ventures to create new riches. Some multinational corporations, such as General Electric, are long active in both countries and able to supplement operations in one by drawing on experience in the other. A new term, ‘Chindia’, appeared in the international lexicon in 2005 by route of book titles. The privately founded and funded India-China-America Institute provides regular

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briefings on doing business across boundaries. Without using ‘Chindia’, the strongly presented theme of meetings on the occasion of Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to India in April 2005 was ‘learning from each other’. Partnership and cooperation in all fields was acclaimed, even in the location and development of new sources of oil and natural gas and construction of pipelines, generally regarded as highly competitive. Bilateral trade had doubled in two years and presently exceeds the volume of bilateral Indo-US trade, (which is only a fraction of bilateral US-China trade). None of these ventures or official cooperation in some international trade negotiations would have been possible without a steady normalisation of India-China relations after Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s ice-breaking state visit to China in 1988.

During the 1990s, agreements were reached on maintaining ‘peace and tranquility’ along the ‘line of actual control’, instituting confidence building measures to obviate accidental conflict, and tackling the troublesome and unresolved border problem at expert and at political levels. Talks continue. The two governments quickly overcame a hiccup caused by India citing a ‘China threat’ as reason for openly testing its nuclear weapons in May 1998 and China joining the US in heavy condemnation of that act. In the first decade of the 21st Century, exchange of visits at the highest political levels has become regular, as also between military commanders. The two armies and navies have undertaken small joint operations to become familiar with each other. Rising numbers of academics, businessmen, officials, students, tourists and Track II participants use the direct air links that became available since 2002. Efforts to knit the economies of northeast India and southwest China continue. Protestations of friendship and denial of threat or possible conflict, issue from both capitals.

Notwithstanding the above, tensions in the India-China relationship surface from time to time and perceptions of threat are expressed in recent strategic writings. Indians see their country ‘encircled’ by an always patronising and possibly hostile China. Its ‘all-weather friendship’ with Pakistan enabled transfer of nuclear materials, missiles and technology in the 1980s (without effective objection from the US) as well as military hardware, and has resulted in a Chinese built deep-water port at Gwadur, on the Arabian Sea. Pakistan has been a burden on India ever since its creation by Britain in 1947 through sustained enmity over the decades. Now Islamist or jihadi terrorism based in Pakistan is a direct threat to India, which looks to Pakistan’s friends to control that international menace; China has not yet openly obliged. Furthermore, China’s overwhelming presence in Burma/Myanmar, its deepening ties with Nepal and Bangladesh, its heavy military preparations in Tibet, and its recent naval ventures into the Indian Ocean along a ‘string of pearls,’ seem to tighten a noose on India. China’s 2008 White Paper on Defence does nothing to reassure, and its belligerent reassertion of claims to all of Arunachal Pradesh in a newly coined term of ‘Southern Tibet’ is interpreted as intimidation. Of course, Indians are well aware of the fact that China has a strategic culture nourished by ancient texts as well as American Realist thinking and India has none, that the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has numerous and dispersed centres of international studies and India has pitiably few, and that China’s well trained diplomatic service now numbers 4,000 while the Indian Foreign Service at 750 is only slightly larger than it was in the 1950s. China is perceived by the rest of the world as a ‘great power’ and behaves like one; India is not, but would like to be regarded in the same category as China.

Chinese perceptions of India receive little attention, probably because India is not a strategic priority for a China focussed on the United States, Japan and Taiwan, and because no one considers India a serious threat to a much stronger China. China became more attentive when it found India’s intangible assets of multiparty democracy, sound judicial system, and intellectual liberalism appealing to the Southeast Asian countries on its periphery. ASEAN actively encourages Indian participation in its regional forums. And there is no doubt that China was seriously disturbed when the United States under the Bush Administration publicly resolved to help India become a world power in strategic partnership with itself, and signed a Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement which ended decades of technology denial to India. China too fears ‘encirclement’ and was quick to see a ‘containment’ plot in the sudden blossoming of close relations between India and Japan, India and the US, and talk of forming a ‘league of democracies’. China is paranoid too about Tibet and the Dalai Lama, whose Government in Exile is located in India. Not even the most explicit, official, written assurances of India’s recognition of China’s sovereignty over the Tibetan Autonomous Region quenches China’s fear of ‘splitism’, as shown by the harsh repression of Tibetan resistance in 2008. Shaun Randol’s research into present day Chinese perceptions of India at many levels of society revealed

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more curiosity, friendliness and feelings of partnership than the sense of competitive rivalry highlighted by others. He recommends clearer communication among the people of China, India and the United States.

We see no clear or uni-dimensional picture of China-India relations today. Military conflict between them is unlikely, yet China will no more accept India's sole domination of South Asia than India would accept China's domination of all-Asia, neither of which in the final analysis, were it only for these reasons, is likely.

Skirmishes on the border should not result in a 1962 style war because India is now able to defend its own territory, and China would prefer not to soil the image it projects of 'peaceful rise, peaceful development, bringing benefit to all'. It is actively cultivating 'soft power' through hundreds of Confucius Studies Institutes established in 50 countries.

We find the idea of 'Chindia' attractive, but hard to make concrete at a time of global recession. Above all, India is India and China is China. Together and separately they contributed hugely to world civilisation and prosperity in the past. Together and separately they will surely contribute hugely to the evolving civilisation of the 21st Century.

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