India-China Relations – An Introspection

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Executive Summary

- The essay attempts a quick appraisal of India’s equation with China from a forward looking strategic standpoint, for charting the way ahead, on the eve of the visit of the Chinese President, Xi Jinping.
- While the immediate task naturally is to work for early realisation of the potential through mutually beneficial diversification and intensification of ties, tapping all possible complementarities through imaginative arrangements and programmes, it is the political relationship that has naturally to be kept in focus as the driver, and determinant of the reach, of the former.

- A summary review of political relations between the two countries identifies two features that deserve note:
  
  (i) The fact of extreme volatility of the relationship – right from the start, and continuing to this day.
  
  (ii) The fact that it is the Chinese diplomatic design (disposed towards generalities and formulations long on lofty rhetoric and abstractions, that invariably lend themselves to conflicting interpretations, and short on unambiguous specifics) that has been allowed to prevail in the corpus of Agreements/Communiques/Declarations/Statements issued over the years. An alternative, Indian template seeking to cast common understandings and shared agreements in tangible terms instead appears to have not even been imagined.

- Two high points of the politico-diplomatic interaction of the two countries – the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement and the 2005 “Strategic and Cooperative Partnership” – are taken up, briefly, to illustrate the latter feature marking the relationship, namely of atmospherics projected by the official documents being allowed to run way ahead of substantive content.
• It is argued that the “strategic partnership” is just an empty shell. With a recommendation that infusion of some solid content into it is a question that should engage the Indian strategic establishment much more intensely, internally, than hitherto.

• Also that the paradigm within which India-China relations have come to be conducted is lacking in balance, and therefore in need of a rejig.

• In particular, the approach to the “boundary talks” of the Special Political Representatives – the ‘three-stage road map’ (proceeding ‘top-down’ from abstract principles and parameters to specifics of territorial adjustments) being followed by the Special Political Representatives – is felt to be in need of a reversal (i.e. a ‘bottom-up’ one, beginning with a prior understanding on the specifics of the eventual boundary alignment evolved instead) in the light of the experience of four decades of ‘normalisation’ of relations (of inordinately, and endlessly, ‘delayed gratification’). A truly ‘political’ approach (entailing “negotiations”, not just “talks”, for coming to grips with the nitty gritty of a final settlement) is recommended to break out of the rut relations have got into over the last several years.
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Introduction

The following reflection on India’s equation with China from a forward looking strategic standpoint, for charting the way ahead, might perhaps merit attention at this juncture, when a new Government in India is preparing to receive the Chinese President, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and Chairman of its Military Affairs Commission -- the 3-in-1 senior most leader of that country who, much like his Indian interlocutor (though not formal counter-part), is as yet early in his (anticipated ten year) term of office albeit with a close to two year head start.

The relationship has come a long way in recent years as a result of over three decades of painstaking diplomacy for ‘normalisation’ of relations, beginning with exchange (resumption) of Ambassadors in 1976 and the bold ice-breaking February 1979 visit of former PM Vajpayee as Foreign Minister (the first after 1962). Since 2005, the two countries are in a declared “strategic and cooperative partnership”, with regular Summit and other high level visits and wide-ranging engagement in a host of areas, including defence. Economic interaction has soared to make China India’s largest trading partner but is still nowhere near potential.

While the immediate task naturally is to work for early realisation of the potential through mutually beneficial diversification and intensification of ties, tapping all possible complementarities through imaginative arrangements and

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programmes, it is the political relationship that has naturally to be kept in focus as the driver, and determinant of the reach, of the former. Without getting mesmerised by pie in the sky, if not downright fanciful, geo-economic scenarios. Here a historical perspective may be in order.

**Reflections on the Relationship**

Two features stand out in a quick review of political relations between the two countries:

**A. Volatile Vibes**

First, and foremost, there is the fact of extreme volatility of the relationship that no reasonable observer can fail to be struck by (and wonder why that should be so) – right from the start, and continuing to this day.

The dramatic deterioration in relations, from a euphoric ‘bhai-bhai’ phase to a ‘bye-bye’ mood within a remarkably short span of less than a decade in the pre-1962 period provides a natural reference point in this regard.

Conventional wisdom avers that it is best left aside, as an aberration that was sui generis -- the product of a very unique confluence of circumstances unlikely to be repeated ever again. Be that as it may, that chastening experience bears recalling not only for the sake of completion, but also for information of the generation(s) born in and after the 60s (that are now poised to assume decision-making responsibilities in different walks of life in the country) with no memories of, or direct feel for, what was, without question, a terribly traumatic moment in the life of the nation.

What of the post 1976 period, of avowed ‘normalisation’ of relations by both sides? Well, it didn’t exactly get off to a flying start either, with former PM Vajpayee forced to cut short his historic ‘patch-up’ visit, envisaged to be a path-breaker, because of the hosts got busy in “teaching a lesson” to Vietnam (as to India earlier in the sixties) while he was still on Chinese soil. Of course, the same argument, about exceptional circumstances (personalised decisions
by charismatic leaders – really, the late Deng Xiaoping, although no Chinese narrative has shown readiness to admit that, or in respect of Mao in case of India in 1962), could be claimed to again apply here, so this too will be sought to be set aside by those inclined to condone China’s transgressions.

And, likewise, perhaps in case of the same lack of sensitivity displayed by the Chinese in conducting a nuclear test during President Venkataraman’s visit to China in 1992 (which happened to be the first Head of State level visit between the two countries ever) – a compliment that had to be returned subsequently.

[Those pre-disposed to dismiss these bloomers as coincidences of no consequence need to square that up with the Chinese proclivity to be sticklers for propriety when it comes to their sensitivities: it was India that had to make the first move for resumption/advance of interaction at all three levels in the post-1962 period (Foreign Minister, Prime Minister and President) – in 1979 (Vajpayee), 1988 (Rajiv Gandhi) and 1992 (Venkataraman) respectively; returned by their counter-parts Huang Hua, Li Peng and Jiang Zemin unhurriedly in 1981, 1991 and 1996 respectively – to make up for the 3 visits initiated by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai (pre-1962) in 1954, ’57 and 1960 (with the last remaining unreciprocated by Pt. Nehru). In addition to having to be the one to assign an Ambassador (late President K R Narayanan) first, in July 1976, as the side that had been the one to withdraw its envoy first, before Chinese Ambassador Chen Chao Yuan was despatched to New Delhi in October 1976.

Nor is it a thing of the past, of the days gone by (before institutionalisation of State functioning into a routinised, non-charismatic/unwhimsical, mode in China, post-Deng Xiaoping) -- in April 2008, the Chinese Foreign Office thought it fit to summon the Indian (lady) Ambassador in Beijing at 2 A.M. to register their concern over a security threat to their Embassy premises in New Delhi following an attack by Tibetan activists the previous day, even though no damage had been caused. That with the country which was, at that time, a declared “strategic and cooperative partner” for three years, as discussed below later!]
PM Rajiv Gandhi’s landmark 1988 visit resulted in relations finally being placed on a higher trajectory. Premier Li Peng’s return visit took some time in coming in 1991 but the ‘normalisation’ exercise could be said to have entered a ‘mature’ phase subsequently, with things taking a turn for the better over the next decade or so (during the Jiang Zemin and initial Hu Jintao years). However, they reverted to form, with an unanticipated downturn soon after a high point in 2005, as below.

During this period, steady progress was made during each high level visit the well thought out 1993 Agreement on management of the border areas (PM Narasimha Rao) followed by the complementary 1996 Agreement on military CBMs (President Jiang Zemin); the 2003 Joint Declaration (PM Vajpayee) that, inter alia, set up the mechanism of Special Political Representatives (SPRs) to explore the “framework of a boundary settlement from the political perspective of the overall bilateral relationship” and, above all, the 2005 “Agreement on Political Parameters & Guiding Principles for Settlement of the Boundary Question” (Premier Wen Jiabao) accompanying the announcement of a “Strategic and Cooperative Partnership” during that visit.

Conclusion of the latter two documents marked a zenith of sorts but could not guarantee an end to the fluctuation characteristic. Article VII of the 2005 Agreement (which provided that the boundary “should be along well defined and easily identifiable natural geographical features” and that both countries would “safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas” while reaching a “boundary settlement”) was widely understood (in India – including by seasoned China experts, not just laymen) to be presaging Chinese readiness to eventually drop their claims in the Eastern sector (covering Arunachal Pradesh) as part of a package deal involving Indian concessions in the Western sector (Aksai Chin) and finally arrive at a settlement before long, concluded as it was in the sunshine of the newly established “strategic and cooperative partnership”.
But these expectations were soon belied by Chinese backtracking. The very next year, the Chinese Ambassador was heard publicly asserting claim to the whole of Arunachal Pradesh on the eve of President Hu Jintao’s visit – a far cry from hopes of a final settlement on the “boundary question” that set the clock back (since the claim to the whole of Arunachal Pradesh meant that it was, in the Chinese perception being projected, not a matter of alignment and/or marginal adjustment of the “boundary” but of negotiation of territory in the entire “border” area).

Though ‘damage containment’ efforts were undertaken by both sides with alacrity, they could only be partially successful. Those efforts were reflected in the “Ten Point Strategy” announced in the Joint Communiqué of the 2006 visit of President Hu Jintao and continued, less prominently, in the texts of documents agreed upon during subsequent visits (of PM/Premier Manmohan Singh, Wen Jiabao, Li Keqiang and Manmohan Singh in 2008, 2010, May and November 2013 respectively). Relations appeared to have reverted to even keel on paper, in the text of these high level official documents, but not in the public domain, where huge chasms of mistrust showed through – in stand offs on the border in 2008/9 and later again, above all, but also otherwise.

Most notable of these were the ‘clever by the half’ attempt to throw spanners in the way of the Nuclear Supplier Group’s 2008 waiver decision (exempting India from its prohibitions), five years plus into the “strategic partnership”, and remarks of
the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson registering a strong protest against PM Manmohan Singh’s visit to Arunachal Pradesh in 2009, in which the strategic partner’s PM was gratuitously referred to as “an Indian leader” (no more than a year and a half after his “successful” 2008 visit, during which a “Shared Vision for the 21st Century” document had been signed!) – language reminiscent almost, in some ways, of vilification of the late PM Nehru during the nadir of the pre-1962 period.

Unsurprisingly, the Special Political Representative negotiations, set up in 2003 after the much acclaimed (in China, more than in India, because of the huge gain it made by getting India to yield on the status of Tibet further than hitherto) visit of PM Vajpayee with considerable fanfare as a way of breaking out of the logjam the official level (Joint Working Group) border talks (carried out pursuant to the understanding reached during the 1988 visit of PM Rajiv Gandhi) were felt to have gotten into, themselves got bogged down over Tawang – a redline for India that the Chinese side was never unaware of – not long after.

The point of noting these ups and downs, of course, is to ask why this bilateral has shown the kind of volatility it has over such a long period – all along actually – and even before the advent of the TRP driven gladiatorial digital media ever thirsty for ‘man bites dog’ like sound bytes? Analysts are prone to seeking explanations in domestic factors (to do with the Chinese or Indian polities) or external ones (to do with China’s relations with other countries or its reading of India’s relations with other countries) as factors causing instability. But those are merely the proximate causes and dwelling on them beyond a point only serves, in the opinion of this writer, to explain away the unusual conduct that has often bordered on the uncivil (or worse, ends up rationalising it) in the unexceptionable endeavor to ‘understand’ the other side.

More important it is perhaps to worry about the trust deficit it has resulted in – i.e. whether it has something to do with (the DNA of) Chinese diplomacy and
psyche that is not grasped at the Indian end, and which impels the Chinese side to rock the boat every now and then, unmindful of the impact on the other side? For a nation that has been at the receiving end of it all invariably, it might, at any hand, be more productive to note the tendency (without blinkers) and brace up for the best of times being followed by reversals unpredictably, than to expend energies on analysis identifying the immediate whys and wherefores of unpredictability.

(The latter task can be left to the nation’s diplomatic machine, for whom there can be no escape from addressing these and related questions as the agency charged with the responsibility of devising appropriate tactical responses to all the nation’s interlocutors.)

B. Tangled Web of Intangibles

A second (related) aspect that is perplexing is about the nature of the nation’s politico-diplomatic interaction with China, as reflected in the documents of the bilateral relationship: Why is it the Chinese diplomatic design (disposed towards generalities and formulations long on lofty rhetoric, abstractions, and intellections, that invariably lend themselves to conflicting interpretations, and short on unambiguous specifics) that has been allowed to prevail (in the corpus of Agreements/Communiques/Declarations/Statements issued over the years)? And not an alternative, Indian, one seeking to cast common understandings and shared agreements in tangible terms instead, which appears to have not even been imagined? Even after the sobering experience with Chinese diplomacy – pre-1962 and all the way since then – with umpteen instances of unpleasant surprises, gaps and misunderstandings appearing all out of nowhere, as it were.

A close reading of the last seven “transformational” high level visits, to go back no farther, is instructive in this regard. Chinese diplomacy would seem to have got the better of India, trapping it in a web of words that add little value but a fair amount of confusion on the strategic plane. By subscribing to clichéd
phrases and concepts which convey only a connotation, not any clear meaning, India has ended up tying itself in knots, to its disadvantage. Vis-à-vis potential allies but also vis-à-vis China itself, as e.g. in crucial sections covering the border negotiations, where intentions are catalogued repeatedly in inane terms such as “encouragement” (or exhortations) to appointed officials (subordinate to the leaders) to do better (as if they were an independent agency, not subject to direction) – what are, at best, ‘means’ seem to have become ‘ends’ in themselves. As with regular, and frequent, Summit level meetings.

(In one document, a reference is made to exchange of visits by the two PMs within the same calendar year as “the first since 1954 and has great significance” – as if significance could be said to lie in the mere frequency of high level contact, regardless of the outcome of the discussions during the visits.

This despite the fact that that document had little to show in respect of the latter on the most important issue -- the boundary settlement -- five years after an earlier document had stated that “the SPRs shall complete at an early date the task of arriving at an agreed framework of settlement....” (emphasis added). Quite apart from the rather awkward allusion to 1954, unmindful of the denouement of the ‘bhai-bhai’ phase those visits espoused.)

All in all, a paradigm that serves to sign in the long haul by dampening expectations of early delivery of tangibles of interest to India. Setting the bar low well serves the Chinese interest, keeping India on the back foot.

A detailed account of these aspects, in specifics and in-depth, would naturally require considerable space and time. Two high points of the politico-diplomatic interaction of the two countries – the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement and the 2005 “Strategic and Cooperative Partnership” (neither of which can be flaunted for perspicacity) – can however illustrate the imbroglio identified in the preceding paragraph (of atmospherics projected by the official documents
being allowed to run way ahead of substantive content) and its implicit prayer for liberation from the tangled web of intangibles.

(i) Panchsheel: Lesson not Learnt

The “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” (which both countries propounded together in 1954 at the very outset of their interaction as independent nations, and championed tirelessly, as a model for inter-state relations in a world afflicted by cold war between clashing ideologies and political systems) became a laughing stock world-wide after the cardinal tenet – “non-aggression” – was trampled over by one proponent over the other. In retrospect, this happened because the Agreement did not rest on any solid foundation. Its key weakness lay in there being no way of ensuring observance of its unexceptionable provisions in practice or seeking remedy against transgressions -- something that became clear in hindsight. Yet even now the Five Principles continue to be paid obeisance together with China, as if the nation’s territorial integrity had never been violated.

Even now, the Five Principles continue to be paid obeisance together with China, as if the nation’s territorial integrity had never been violated.

[The Government’s decision to mark its 60th anniversary jointly with China almost immediately after assuming office in May, with high level attendance from India, was maladroit. Hon’ble Vice-President’s tactful allusion to the “scar on the Indian psyche” on the sidelines of the occasion was statesmanly but a huge advantage, on the propaganda front above all, had already been handed over to Chinese diplomacy on a platter as a result of meek Indian acquiescence in the very design of the event without an attempt to negotiate a quid pro quo, by way of some acknowledgement of Chinese culpability for transgression, be it an indirect one, or any other.]
We should not be surprised, or saddened, then if the national discourse on foreign policy is not hard-headed and frequently tends to reduce to a pot-pourri of principles and pious sentiments with a kind of ‘run away norm’ coming into play all too easily.

[A strong case emerges from the above for commissioning of an official history of contemporary relations (internally, for use within Government and Parliamentary Standing Committees etc.) with countries where ties are sensitive, contextualised in a wider perspective than a purely bilateral one periodically (say once in a decade), so as to enable a strategic focus to be brought to bear, in real time, on foreign policy decision-making (including negotiation of texts of documents in particular) – something for which there has, apparently, never been a felt need within Government. The present practice -- of fire-fighting, relying on individual excellence -- must give way to one capable of tapping institutional insights and memory and historical perspectives in a systematic and thorough manner. Far from Government fostering scholarship on contemporary aspects of bilateral relations (by opening official records to invited scholars on a restricted basis), however, even the older archives are yet to be declassified, fifty years plus after the end of the Nehru era (not to mention earlier periods), as against the twenty five year proviso for declassification of files under the Official Secrets Act).

The following (anecdotal) account of the 180 degree turn in the Chinese posture on Kashmir (that has been doing the rounds amongst veteran China hands for decades now ruefully) bears recalling in this connection, even if it be an apocryphal one (and at the risk of over-simplification). In the early fifties, when relations with India were good, the refrain (of Chinese diplomats to their Indian counterparts) is said to have been words to the effect “when have we said that Kashmir is not yours”. Later, after the downturn in relations and slicing off of 5000 sq. kms. plus territory (Shaksgam valley) through the 1963 Sino-Pak ‘boundary agreement’, this morphed into a “when did we say that Kashmir is yours” mode – both postures on the strength of a consistent (very
(ii) Strategic Partnership: Symbolism Scores over Substance

So also the “Strategic and Cooperative Partnership” (declared in April 2005, during the visit of the Chinese PM Wen Jiabao). The justification for according China that exalted standing is even less obvious than in case of Panchsheel. In advance of one with Japan (which had to make do, in that same month -- April 2005 -- with no more than a “strategic orientation” to its “Global Partnership” with India established much earlier, in 2000, and wait another year and a half, till Dec. 2006, before it could secure a full-fledged “Strategic and Global Partnership" with India). It is not clear what precisely that labeling was intended to mean in practice. Could the description “constructive and cooperative partnership” (without capital letters, most importantly, i.e. without a label directed at others), already agreed to just two years earlier during the visit of PM Vajpayee, not have done just as well?

It is not clear what precisely that labeling (strategic partnership) was intended to mean in practice. Could the description “constructive and cooperative partnership” already agreed to just two years earlier…., not have done just as well?
Former PM Manmohan Singh was remarkably upbeat in his Suo Moto statement in the Lok Sabha on the Joint Statement consecrating the strategic partnership:

It “codifies the consensus between us that India-China relations transcend bilateral issues and have now acquired a global and strategic character. The partnership also reflects our desire to proactively resolve outstanding differences, while not letting them come in the way of continued development of relations. This is not in the nature of a military pact or alliance but reflects a congruence of purpose apart from a common perception of world events.” (emphasis added)

That generous assessment has remained totally unscrutinised, despite its weighty import. It needs to be examined carefully now for its tenability -- in the light of the experience, of the decade or so since then above all. Whether, in retrospect at least, it would not appear to have gone overboard -- and not just by a small margin. For it has obvious implications for the Indian strategic posture, which cuts an ‘uncrisp’ and unsure profile; perennially falling between the ‘democratic’ and ‘multi-polar’ stools, so to say, and swerving between extremes (of public declarations about there being strategic congruences and their not being rivals, some days of the week, and determination to address the ‘China challenge’, on others upon being confronted, as happens periodically, with sensitive disclosures).

[Chinese strategists can, at any hand, safely be presumed to have been pleased, even delighted, at that development. For easing their hapless efforts for sowing seeds of confusion on the global strategic horizon. (Their ‘grand strategy’ goal, it could be surmised, of obfuscating natural fault lines on the international chessboard, inter alia, by locking India in a diplomatic embrace in the hope of warding off, or at least delaying, potentially uncomfortable convergences.)

The fact that China has been able to attempt such a (diplomatically) ambitious task on the strength of little more than professions of good intent and
normative unexceptionables (i.e. without any cost to itself by way of any real – substantive -- ‘gives’ to India) is, or should be, all the more galling to the nation’s politico-strategic establishment (and to its diplomatic machine).]

One way of squaring up the disjunction, commonsensically, is to posit a promise, i.e. assurance, of a good, i.e. satisfactory, border settlement on the part of the Chinese at that time (in the absence of information about what transpired during, and in the build up to, PM Wen Jiabao’s 2005 visit). And an early one at that, for no terms of settlement can be considered good, obviously, if the time-line for their fructification extends into the indefinite future. The ‘down payment’ by India, by way of according consent to a misleading grandiose epithet leaping way ahead of ground reality, which made little sense anyway actually in terms of existing or even potential strategic convergences between the two nations, is quite incomprehensible otherwise.

[On the question of an early resolution of the border issue, it is over 35 years since former PM Vajpayee’s historic ‘patch up’ visit to China as the Foreign Minister in February 1979. At that time, Foreign Minster Vajpayee had reportedly countered the late Deng Xiaoping’s disingenuous bait on setting the border issue aside for future generations to resolve while proceeding ahead with ‘normalisation’ of relations straightaway, by his ready wit, citing the Indian maxim ‘kal kare so aaj kar, aaj kare so ab’ in reply.

But it is Deng’s line that was allowed to prevail ultimately – imperceptibly, i.e. without even a frontal acknowledgement of its acceptance (to the Indian public), much less an in-depth examination of its implications/impact in a strategic perspective -- in the waters that have washed the diplomatic parleys since the 1988 visit of late PM Rajiv Gandhi (which first conceded the point, implicitly but very clearly, by agreeing to the formulation “work hard to create a favorable climate and conditions for a fair and reasonable settlement of the boundary question, while seeking a mutually acceptable solution to this question”, with its obvious riders). (emphasis added)
From there on to the present (more explicit) mantra of ‘differences not being allowed to come in the way of improvement of relations’ (i.e. putting the issue on the back burner indefinitely) is not a big leap.

Oddly, the Indian side has not considered it necessary to secure mention of some kind of a target date, if not deadline, from China in return for agreeing to repeat that mantra (totally reversing its starting point of normalisation of relations) on every occasion without fail.

That context can thus provide a touchstone for evaluation of the soundness of the “strategic partner” depiction -- and for delineating its contours afresh (given that it is a fait accompli now). The new Government would surely be applying that test in its internal review of the state of play in India-China relations – now, in preparation for Xi Jinping’s visit (even if it missed the opportunity to do so in its opening days, before conveying readiness to receive the Chinese Foreign Minister immediately on assuming office).

An immediate settlement on the boundary without any further delay is, however, not the only criterion pertinent in this connection (of the need to infuse hard-headed content into the “strategic partnership”). That country’s “special relationship” with its “all weather ally”, Pakistan, is another. Though claimed by the Chinese to be an unexceptionable one, as between any two neighbouring states almost, that is absolutely not the case. Even those well disposed to China, be it for ideological reasons or because of their exaggerated reading of realpolitik, cannot reasonably turn a blind eye to the less than benign dimensions
of Sino-Pak ties. Not to speak of the latter ill behoving a country that claims to be a strategic partner of India. This is an aspect on which again Indian diplomacy would appear to have remained unduly defensive. Its inability to factor in this utter incongruity (before parenting a strategic partnership) is quite inexplicable. It is therefore hoped that the Sino-Pak nexus would also be high on the agenda of the review exercise of the new Government.

III. The Way Ahead: Focus on Tangibles

The obvious questions arising from both the abovementioned features of the political relationship stand out for being unexamined, largely, in the national discourse on relations with China. They have an immediate claim on the Government’s attention in the wake of the current visit, unbound as it is to inherited formulations and frameworks in the field of foreign affairs (as much as in the domestic policy realm) -- or at least should feel itself to be, if the nation is to reap the advantage of a make-over.

The official India-China relations narrative takes on so much of the burden of the past (unsaid) that there is no room remaining, it would appear, for basic questions. But they must be asked, even if it be in the naïve child-like ‘but the Emperor has no clothes on’ vein.

The strategic partnership with China must be seen to be what it is — just an empty shell. How to infuse some solid content into it is a question that should engage the Indian strategic establishment much more intensely, internally, than hitherto. It would be desirable to await the (previous) talk being walked to allow the hyperbole bubble to dissolve itself and pave the way for down to earth, beneficial bilateralism to come to the fore. A determination needs to be made, moreover, whether the paradigm within which India-China relations have come to be conducted is not lacking in balance, and therefore in need of
a rejig. India-China relations are in dire need of disruptive ‘newthink’, but that will not come so long as officialdom sticks to its ‘continuity and consistency’ driven comfort zones.

And the entire approach to the “boundary talks” – the ‘three-stage road map’ (proceeding ‘top-down’ from abstract principles and parameters to specifics of territorial adjustments) – perhaps needs to be reversed (i.e. a ‘bottom-up’ one, beginning with a prior understanding on the specifics of the eventual boundary alignment) in the light of the experience of four decades of ‘normalisation’ -- of (inordinately, and endlessly) ‘delayed gratification’.

A truly ‘political’ approach (entailing “negotiations”, not just “talks”, for coming to grips with the nitty gritty of a final settlement) is what is called for now to break out of the rut relations have got into over the last several years.

Sardar Patel’s prescient letter of 1950 to Pt. Nehru commends itself at this juncture in the nation’s relationship with its redoubtable neighbour to the North, when the difficult diplomatic exercise of a dignified ‘normalising’ of relations with the country that gave the nation an unforgettable 1962 was yet a work-in-progress, as a model of realism and a safeguard against allowing symbolism to score over substance.

Given the little time left now, a fundamental relook may not be practical for evolving a ‘doable’ — in terms of a text (draft) for a document to be signed during the visit. At the same time, the need for such a ‘radical review’ is paramount, as argued in the foregoing. And the opportunity to do it is now, when the new Government is yet to step into the flow; it will not be there later, once they have jumped into the fray with a document of their own.
A truly ‘political’ approach (entailing “negotiations”, not just “talks”, for coming to grips with the nitty gritty of a final settlement) is what is called for now to break out of the rut relations have got into over the last several years.

For, if the Government gets around to signing a document, no matter how much improved its text be, it will lose the possibility – the moral authority – to question the entire paradigm and seek to replace it with a new approach altogether based on specifics, breaking free of the bind the nation has gotten into over the years.

A way out of this dilemma would be to openly declare to the Chinese side the desire of the new Government to take measure of the voluminous documentation of the relationship, admitting lack of time to do so as yet. And meanwhile to restrict all understandings reached during the visit to the oral level. i.e. to not sign any document anew, not comment on any previous understanding or reiterate anything (the “strategic partnership”, above all) and leave it to each side to brief the media on the tenor and content of the discussions.

The desire, and determination, to start afresh with greater clarity of purpose than hitherto would be manifest in such a course of action – and that should be enough of a gain for the present. And yet, it would not tie the Government’s hands for the future in any way, leaving all options open.

This suggestion for reticence and restraint applies, naturally, to political documentation only; agreements on the economic, investment, trade, tourism, culture and education or other fronts – anything fitting a ‘tangibles only’ tag, as it were – need not be shunned.
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