



Visit of President Xi Jinping to India

Speakers: Mr. Ravi Bhoothalingam, Col. Virendra Sahai Verma(retd.) Dr. Jabin T.Jacob

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The three-day visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping had generated great expectations, as it set the tone for Sino-Indian relations following the change of government in New Delhi. The economic dimension of the visit received significant focus, in anticipation of higher Chinese investments in India's modernization and industrial development. Given that the final figures of investment were lower than the expected number and that tensions prevailed in the border during the course of Xi's visit, the overall assessment has been rather mixed. With this background, the speakers presented their views on the various aspects of the visit; agreements signed and understanding a better perspective of the visit in the larger canvas of Sino-Indian relations.

The first speaker Mr. Ravi Bhoothalingam dealt with the economic significance of the visit of Chinese President. Bhoothalingam, at the outset, noted that in the wake of the extraordinary media-hype created around Xi's visit there was a need to understand the engagement between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi in a way that neither the details nor the vision should overwhelm. The speaker pointed out that whether it is Deng Xiaoping's theory of development or Xi Jinping's 'China Dream', these could not entirely be defined by the economy. In fact, social and cultural progresses also to a great extent influence the vision of the Chinese leaders. He used the term 'consumption model' to describe Chinese leadership's view about China's course of development which affect everything from investment to social progress. However, the speaker argued that another vision of Chinese leaders 'outreach to the neighbour' started with Hu

Jintao's economic policy of 'investment programme'. In this way, Chinese President's visit to India assuredly has an economic underpinning. Although there is an ongoing debate in media and dissatisfaction in some quarters about the quantum of Chinese investment in India got reduced from US\$100-billion to US\$20 billion only over the next five years. Despite its reduction the speaker had a positive outlook. He said that even US\$20 billion is not a small amount as India is a big market and needs huge investment. According to him India needs a huge infrastructure development and with Chinese investment can be a win-win game. Finally, Bhoothalingam said that we should neither be overwhelmed nor be neglectful towards the visit as the economic engagement also has to balance the geo-political issue. Virendra Sahai Verma, the second speaker talked about the recently opened Kailash-Manasarovar route through Nathula Pass for the Indian pilgrims during the visit of Chinese President. The new route will pass through Gangtok, Yatung and the city of Shigatse, which is part of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Every year from 9th June to 9th September, the Ministry of External Affairs organizes pilgrimage to Kailash-Mansarovar. Although, the Nathula route to Kailash-Mansarovar will shorten the distance and will be more convenient for vehicles, the speaker however is doubtful about the Nathula route. He said that the season for the pilgrimage is not good for travelling in this area. Verma argued that route through Demchok could be a better option for the pilgrimage to Kailash-Mansarovar.

The last speaker Dr. Jabin Jacob brought out the political significance of the visit of the Chinese President. He started his presentation with media-hype about the Chinese investment in India. Noting that more than the figure of investment, the emphasis should be on how India was going to utilize the investment. India required an investment-friendly environment in order to use the investment properly whether it's US\$100 billion or 20 billion. According to the speaker, at present, only a few states in India such as Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu relatively possess investment-friendly environment in the form of good governance, high socio-economic indicators, skilled workforce, good quality physical infrastructure, clear economic vision and so on. On the other, the visit had no agreement signed on easing visa regulations for Chinese people, particularly for Chinese businessmen. It was also important to keep in mind that Chinese enterprises were also profit-oriented and did not always take orders from the Communist Party of China.

In terms of political agreements the speaker noted that no agreement on trans-border river waters signed. In the previous visits of top Chinese leaders, there usually was an agreement on information

sharing on one or the other river between the two countries. While discussing about the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) incursion in Ladakh, the speaker pointed out that it could have been a signal to India in the context of Modi's visit to Japan and President Pranab Mukherjee's visit to Vietnam.

Jacob also highlighted some similarities between President Xi and Prime Minister Modi. Both Modi and Xi were trying to be the single authority in their respective nations and both leaders' foreign policy agendas had a strong focus on the neighbourhood. If Xi Jinping was talking about the Maritime Silk Route, Narendra Modi's government was also in the process of rolling out a similar project on ancient Indian trade routes titled Project Mausam. However, the speaker noted that most of these projects appeared to be an Indian 'reaction' to the Chinese initiative. He emphasized that rather than imitating or responding to China, the Indian leadership also had to develop new ideas of their own. Finally, the speaker pointed out the need for more local-level or state-/provincial-level interactions between India and China rather than between Beijing and New Delhi only. Jacob also pointed out the importance of the role of Special Representative in India-China relations and said it was important that the Modi government announce its Special Representative soon as a sign of its seriousness about settling the boundary dispute at the earliest. In addition to the three speakers, Prof. Tan Chung also gave his remarks about the visit of the Chinese President Xi Jinping to India. He was very hopeful about the fact that Xi in his speech had shown interest not only in India-China relations but had shown interest in knowing India's civilization and culture. Xi in his speech showed interest in knowing India from every perspective which was not usual with Chinese leaders. On the other hand, Prof. Tan also saw enthusiasm in India's new Prime Minister's Narendra Modi's initiative towards improving India-China relations. However, Tan argued that we should not assess this visit of Chinese President as a landmark in India-China Relations rather we should wait for next five years to see the development of interaction between President Xi and Prime Minister Modi to discuss the parameters of India-China Relations in Xi-Modi era. Finally, he explained how India is strategically important for China and he argued that good relations with India were actually a necessity for China. If China did not have good relations with India, Tibet and Xinjiang would not be stable either, which, of course, was not desirable for China. In this sense, he said that if China want to build a community of common destiny for the world, first it is important to create common destiny for India and China as both the countries share one third of the total world population.

DISCUSSION

Prof. Patricia Uberoi and Amb. Eric Gonsalves commented from the BCIM perspective on the visit of the Chinese President. Prof. Uberoi pointed out that although BCIM was mentioned in the joint statement signed between the two countries during the visit, it was not adequately emphasized given the potential of the BCIM Economic Corridor in furthering India-China relations. In fact, Amb. Gonsalves noted that Xi had given more emphasis on BCIM in the interviews held before he came for the visit to India than was present in the joint statement itself.

Two of the main points discussed was the boundary issue and the role played by the media during the visit. Question arose whether the centrality of the boundary issue has been neglected by the Indian media. Some participants also doubted the political will of the Indian government to resolve the border issue. It was being suggested that the border transgressions were an entirely local dynamics and that two governments should try to find solutions at the local level. While this contention was countered by some, it was agreed that coordination between military units in the border area and the two political leaderships was strongly needed in order to have a solution to the issue. While discussing the border issue, speakers of the seminar Mr. Boothalingam, Dr. Jacob and Amb. Gonsalves although agreed to the fact that border dispute is one of the central issues in India-China relations. However, the speakers stated that border issue should not act as mere end to India-China relations. Questions were also asked in terms of the timing of the visit of Chinese President to India. One participant commented the visit is actually sandwiched between India's Prime Minister's visit to U.S and his proceeding visit to Japan. However, one of the speakers Dr. Jacob with a positive note pointed out that the timing of the visit actually showed how India became important for China.

The discussion proceeded to discuss the role played by media in this particular visit of Chinese President to India. Questions raised in terms of the involvement of China experts in the so called media game played during the visit. One participant from media mentioned that since the whole television media is business oriented and mostly focused on increasing their television rating points (TRP) relying on entirely on T.V media is not always a good option. The speakers stated that media should not be the barometer to judge the success and failure of the visit.

The comparison between Xi-Modi initiatives to Rajiv Gandhi-Deng initiative in India-China relations to revive bilateral relations also came up to the discussion. In an answer to the question asked by Prof. Manoranjan Mohanty, Dr. Jacob mentioned that India-China had not reached the limits of Rajiv Gandhi-Deng Xiaoping initiative to revive bilateral ties. The Gandhi-Deng initiative was a completely

personality-driven process. Today, Sino-Indian ties have expanded much beyond interactions between two individuals because of the role played by number of other actors such as media, think-tanks and in particular, the states/provinces in India and China.

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