

## **Media Perspectives and the public opinion on Prime Minister Modi's 3-Nation visit to China, Mongolia and South Korea**

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi conducted a six days, three-nation visit to the People's Republic of China, Mongolia and the Republic of Korea from 14 to 19 May 2015. This visit has generated great expectations on the respective countries bilateral relations with India. He spent a total of three days in China, one day in Mongolia followed by two days in South Korea. The visit engendered a huge response in the media of the respective countries. This is a report of the special panel discussion organised by the Institute of Chinese Studies. The panelists are Dr Hemant Adlakha, Honorary Fellow, ICS (China), Dr Sharad Kumar Soni, Associate Professor, JNU (Mongolia) and Prof Vyjayanti Raghavan, Professor, JNU (South Korea).

### **Dr. Hemant Adlakha – on China**

Professor Hemant Adlakha, the first speaker of the discussion threw light on how Chinese media covered, reported and reacted to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to China. He mentioned that the Indian media had a mixed reaction and used different terms to describe Modi's visit to China. Contrarily, the Chinese media, both in print and online portals, referred to his visit as a 'hit visit'. The speaker provided a detailed account of the significance of the visit among the Chinese political community and the people at large.

According to the Speaker, the Chinese people were not very used to a visiting foreign leader being given so much attention and reportage by their media. There were ample amount of commentaries and analysis by different bodies, including the media houses on Modi's visit to China. Meticulous details about Modi's attire, the number of times he wears and changes into new clothes too gained much attention. Two things about the visit stand out in the speaker's view:

firstly, the Chinese President, Xi Jinping himself went to receive Modi in Xian. Secondly, Modi had been welcomed in an extremely traditional manner by means of cultural performances, more specifically the lion dance that dates back to the Tang dynasty. Many Chinese themselves had not witnessed such traditional performances for quite a long time.

The speaker drew attention to an extremely important subject of 'culture' that featured in Modi's talks in China. Modi's visit must be remembered for its potential to forge relations at three main levels, namely, the state leadership interaction, people to people contact and the widespread coverage by the Chinese media.

He also discussed some commentaries that alluded to Chinese and Indian concerns. India, as highlighted in different Chinese commentaries, has three-fold concerns, namely, a permanent membership in UNSC, the settling of the India-China border dispute and addressing the trade deficit between the two nations. China's concerns, as put forth in the commentaries, pertained to India's refusal to go ahead with the OBOR, BCIM and the AIIB; as also the issue of South Tibet or Arunachal Pradesh.

Further, the speaker shared that accessing information has become easier on the web which seemed unimaginable in the 1980's or 90's. He also mentioned the role of think tanks as gaining increasing significance in the present times. Within this context, he contended that more and more scholars are taking up areas related to foreign policy concerning India-China for their research. Scholars interested in other streams of area studies are also looking at the role of China and India.

In his closing remarks, the speaker conceded that a quick solution to the Sino-Indian border dispute does not seem to be conceivable in the near future. The cause behind this discord lies in the nature of the two countries and he termed both of them as 'hard bargainers'. He also pointed out that there is a huge difference in the perception of both countries pertaining to the resolution to the border dispute.

As an expert in Chinese language, he shared that Modi's speeches and talks could not find expression in Chinese translations in its true sense. As a result, the Chinese media itself cautioned the people of China to read the English version of Modi's speeches in China in order to grasp the essence of his speeches more closely.

## **Prof Vyjayanti Raghavan – on South Korea**

The second speaker, Prof Vyjayanti Raghavan dealt with Korean Media's response towards the Indian Prime Minister's visit to the country. Prof. Raghavan, at the outset of her presentation mentioned the media exposure of the Modi's visit to Seoul was comparatively insignificant to that of China's. US Joint Secretary John Kerry's simultaneous visit to Seoul might have engendered the sluggish response from the Korean Media to Modi's visit. However, on the positive side, there is a growing interest in South Korea towards economic co-operation with India. In fact, South Korea has already started seeing India as an alternative to China in world markets; this was primarily evident from the recent tweet of South Korean Ambassador to India.

The speaker informed about the hopes of leading Korean printing media houses pertaining to 'sweeping structural reforms' initiated by the Modi government. *Joong Ang Ilbo*, a Korean newspaper, argued that Modi's vision of development can infuse further improvement in bilateral relations. The speaker also discussed South Korea's optimism in India's science and technology prowess. In this regard, she cited *Korea Herald*, another leading Korean Newspaper, which saw a strong synergy in India's technological acumen and South Korea's manufacturing capacity towards the creation of a new economic value.

In addition, the speaker highlighted observations from interviews of several Indian and Korean scholars conducted as a part of the coverage of the visit. The objective of these interviews were to gain insight into Indian perspective over several issues; such as the significance of India-South Korea bilateral relations, sustainability of India's economic growth, prospects of CEPA, and South Korea's engagement with China and Pakistan. The interviews indicate major South Korean concerns regarding further economic engagement with India.

In conclusion, the speaker argued that while South Korea's interests are driven by economic concerns, India's motivations are driven by security concerns. South Korea is mainly interested in increasing market access, cost reduction, creating export hubs, and supply of defense equipment. India's interest lies in boosting R&D, building military equipment, intelligence sharing, personnel training, bolstering its surveillance system etc.

## **Dr Sharad Kumar Soni – on Mongolia**

Dr. Sharad Kumar Soni focused on the importance of Modi's visit to Mongolia. He pointed out that it was the first ever Prime Ministerial visit from India and was well covered by the Mongolian media. He further mentioned that Buddhism and democracy were the focal point of discussion in the media since these are the two common factors shared by the two countries. The speaker argued that for India the visit had more to do with its desire to gain a psychological leverage over China in making a more profound presence in China's neighborhood. In fact, the Mongolian media too highlighted China's predominance in the country as the main reason behind Modi's visit. Apart from the China factor, the speaker argued that the visit can also be seen from the perspective of India's 'Act East Policy'. Additionally, Modi's visit could also be considered as a response to Mongolia's 'third neighbor policy'.

Mongolia basically introduced India as a 'third neighbour' in 2010 in its scheme of foreign policy, along with US, South Korea, Japan, Turkey, Canada and Germany. However, such a policy has been tempered by caution since it does not want to jeopardise relations with its immediate neighbors, China and Russia. Nevertheless, the speaker mentioned that, India's extension of USD 1 billion line of credit to Mongolia for infrastructure development received with enthusiasm by the media in Mongolia. It was hoped that it would enhance trade and business ties and Indian companies would get more opportunities to invest in Mongolia.

Later this year, both the countries will celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. Hence, Modi's visit preceded a momentous occasion with the PM aiming to consolidate the comprehensive partnership and building a new road towards strategic partnership. The speaker highlighted some of the agreements signed between the two nations during the visit. An Air Service agreement was signed for the establishment of direct flights between the two countries. An MoU was concluded between the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, India with the Ministry of Energy, Mongolia. Another MoU was signed between Tata Memorial Centre, India and the National Cancer Centre of Mongolia for acquiring Bhava-Tron 2 tele-therapy from India.

In conclusion, the speaker assessed the visit positively for giving a much needed boost to the bilateral relations and for attempting to address the misperception among the Mongolian people that Mongolia has not been considered as an important country by India. He suggested joint military exercises and international peacekeeping exercises as important means to enhance

defense and security ties between the two countries. On the economic front, Mongolia's mining sector would create a new win-win cooperation between the two countries, primarily through joint ventures and investment.

## **Discussion**

The discussion began with a question on how Modi's visit to Mongolia was reported in the Chinese media. To this, Hemant Adalkha responded by mentioning that India cannot afford to start tying up strategic dimension in order to check China's move. He also contended that India in the next years would emerge as the largest developing country while China has an immense potential for gaining the status of a superpower. Under such scenario, he did not believe that the Chinese media would require to have paid much attention to Modi's visit to Mongolia.

On being asked why China did not consider the border issue as significant as compared to India, the speaker answered that India had long term interest in legitimising its border with China. On the contrary, many Chinese political leaders would regard this move of India as 'suicidal' as it would not redress any of their problems with regard to the India-China border. In this context, the speaker stated that Modi had made it very clear that India was not ready to lose out or provide any concessions as far as the question of Tibet was concerned.

Prof Raghavan remarked on fluidity of culture when asked to comment over negative opinion in China over supposed South Korean 'claims' on the traditional Dragon Boat Festival. She explained that while claiming sovereignty over cultural heritage would not affect trade and security relations, it might create bad blood in cultural relations. The festival might have originated in China, but over time, culture flows across regions and countries cannot make exclusive claims on it.

Questions were also asked with regards the joint military exercises and the international peacekeeping exercises between India and Mongolia. To this, Dr Soni replied that since 2004 India and Mongolia have been conducting joint counter-insurgency trainings known as the 'Nomadic Elephant' in North-East India. He further mentioned that these trainings have been taking place alternatively in India and Mongolia. He also highlighted the recent joint training exercises between India and Mongolia.

### ***About the Speakers***

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