



Asia-Pacific Situation and Regional Integration: Some Reflections

Speakers: Dr. Tshering Chonzom Bhutia and Dr. Rityusha Mani Tiwary

Chair: Dr. Jabin T. Jacob, Fellow and Assistant Director, Institute of Chinese Studies

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In December, 2015 the Chinese embassy in India and the China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU) invited a delegation of 28 members from various Delhi based think tanks to China. This delegation consisted of research scholars from organizations like the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). For over a period of one week, the delegation participated in several symposiums held in institutions in Beijing and Shanghai – China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU), China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), Tsinghua University, Shanghai Institute of International Studies (SIIS) and Fudan University. Some of the important themes of the symposia included ‘Asia-Pacific Situation and Regional Integration’, ‘China’s One Belt One Road project (OBOR)’, ‘Asian Connectivity and Regional Integration’, ‘Political and Security Situation in South Asia and Sino-Indian Relations’, ‘International Situation and Great Power relationships’, ‘World Counter Terrorism Situation and Global Governance’ and ‘Asia-Pacific Situation and China, US and India Trilateral Relations’. Out of the 28 members, five were from the Institute of Chinese Studies.

Dr. Tshering Chonzom Bhutia and Dr. Rityusha Mani Tiwary, who were a part of this delegation made a presentation on the topic Asia-Pacific Situation and Regional Integration while giving their overall opinion about the visit. This presentation was made on 27 of January 2016 at the ICS Seminar Room and it was chaired by Dr. Jabin T. Jacob. Dr. Tshering Chonzom Bhutia began the presentation by giving a detailed description on the broad direction of the visit. The presentation was divided into two halves, the first half focusing on regional integration, which

was taken up by Dr. Tshering Chonzom and the second half on the Asia-Pacific situation, which was taken up by Dr. Rityusha Mani Tiwari.

With regards to regional integration, Dr. Tshering Chonzom provided a detailed description of the OBOR project as an initiative which aims at Asian integration. The OBOR project promises a combination of physical infrastructure and economic development. More than 60 countries have already joined the project and another 57 have joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) which is considered as one of the primary funding agency of the OBOR initiative. The aim of the presentation was to relate some of the comments and responses from the Chinese officials and scholars they met to the overarching questions concerning the OBOR as to its rationale, objectives, content, strategy and skepticism about it being a grand strategy towards hegemony, and while being touted as a reformist initiative, it might just replicate the existing Bretton woods institutions.

Of course, the speaker clarified, that the answers to these overarching questions are not necessarily clear. Most of the scholars and diplomats concentrated on explaining the reason behind OBOR and explaining that it was driven by economic rationale. Some of the senior officials of Foreign Affairs suggested that the OBOR project was initiated because of the challenges in economic growth that the Chinese government was facing. Further, the importance of infrastructure was felt deeply after the financial crisis. As far as the question on the composition of OBOR the answers varied. Some sought to emphasize that China had no other motivation besides economic growth and mutual benefit. Another sought to compare the OBOR to the reform and opening policies of the 1970s, which had no fixed plan and was evolving. Another scholar mentioned that China's own strategic community is not clear about what OBOR really is and hence, cannot provide details about it.

Next, the speaker dwelt on the comments and responses made with regards India and OBOR. Before that she briefly discussed how OBOR is seen in India and the reasons why India's joining the OBOR has been an issue. Firstly, many in India had problems with the usage of the term 'Silk Road' to define the project by China. The speaker went on to mention some of the comments regarding India and OBOR. One stated that if India has a strategy, it should put it forward, and accordingly it could be discussed. They are waiting patiently for it. It was also clearly stated that China has no intentions of challenging the big powers. Additionally, a lot of information about President Xi's visions was given at the MOFA. The speaker felt that the Chinese officials did not necessarily pursue the same views on the aspect of OBOR and global governance. One of the officials was of the view that the existing system of governance was unjust; hence the OBOR was initiated as a reform policy. Whereas, some others argued that the current global (especially financial) architecture is unjust and hence, need to be reformed.

In her concluding remarks, the speaker suggested that internally, there needs to be a balance in regional growth. Since OBOR is infrastructure driven, the focus on the already existing infrastructure which are very weak like in the Tibetan Plateau should be considered. Lastly,

potential for competition between provinces like Yunnan, Sichuan and Tibet vying for a place in the OBOR cannot be discounted and hence, the various stakeholders has the opportunity to intervene in a constructive way.

The second speaker, Dr. Rityusha Mani Tiwary, began her presentation by stressing on some of the observations she made during the visit through the usage of the concept of asymmetry in Chinese and Indian foreign policy planning process. At the outset, she found it interesting that the title of the symposium was 'Asia-Pacific Situation' and Asia-Pacific conflict, or issues or relations and so on. In her view, the choice of the term 'situation' connotes a more value neutral stance. Moving on, the speaker explained in some detail the difference between the Chinese and Indian discourses on the geographical composition of the Asia-Pacific region.

She believed that China's approach towards Asia-Pacific was based on the principles of separation while India's approach is based on the principles of interconnectedness. India always considers the chain of events or causality in its foreign relations but China separates not only different issues but also different regions. Accordingly, to the speaker, in China, the foreign policy discourse depends on whom they are addressing and it is possible for China to talk about the seeming interconnectedness on the grounds of separation. Additionally, along with separation, China is also capable of prioritizing issues. Another interesting observation made by the speaker was yet another difference between India and China regarding its foreign policies, that China is pragmatic while India is cautious. The speaker defined pragmatism as the objective assessment of reality and said that the Chinese academics are using a very pragmatic framework while India's approach has always been one of caution.

Discussion

In the ensuing discussion, two other members of the delegation present in the audience shared their views and experiences on the visit. Alpana Verma, a PhD Scholar from Delhi University was a part of the delegation representing IPCS mentioned that she presented a paper on Cyber Security in China and according to her observation, with regards the issue of terrorism, the Indian delegation discussed at length about Pakistan but none of the Chinese scholars or officials mentioned Pakistan. Dr. Tiwary's attempt to theorise foreign policy issues was critically appraised and encouraged. At the same time, her attempt to classify India's foreign policy as being cautious and China's as being pragmatic was met with some skepticism by some and suggestions were made on the same which the speaker welcomed. Incentivization, political culture and political accountability and multiculturalism as an instrument of foreign policy were also discussed.

There were also questions about whether the OBOR and the general discourse on foreign policy in China is in consistence with the existing global governance structure; were the discourses original or autonomous from the existing schools of thought, such as Realism or neo-constructivism and so on; and do the Chinese incorporate regionalism and multilateralism as

principles of foreign policy? Dr. Bhutia sought to provide her perspective on these questions. On the first question, it was observed that the discourses were mixed; on the second, she believed that the Chinese seem to follow a realist rational school of thought; and on the third question, while she clarified that she is not be able to provide much insight, but if we regard the comments on South China Sea issue, then bilateralism seems to be a more preferable option.

In conclusion, the speakers remarked that the visit was very enlightening as there were discussions on varied themes and there were no restrictions on the questions asked or topics discussed.

Report prepared by Preksha Shree Chhetri, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Tshering Chonzom Bhutia is an Associate Fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies. She has a PhD from the Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India. Presently, she is undertaking a research project funded by ICSSR to study Indian and Chinese ethnic minority policies. She speaks and writes regularly on Sino-Tibetan issues and related themes. In January 2013, she was part of a three member delegation from India to Kathmandu to launch the initiative 'China-India-Nepal Trilateral Cooperation', hosted by the Nepal Institute of International and Strategic Studies in collaboration with the ICS and a number of institutions in China. Earlier, she undertook a one month study visit to Taiwan in 2007 where she attended lectures on Taiwanese culture, society, economy and polity.

Rityusha Mani Tiwary teaches Political Science in the University of Delhi. She completed her MPhil (2010) and PhD (2015) in Chinese Studies from School of International Studies, JNU. She has held fellowships at the Politics and International Studies Department at the University of Cambridge (2013), Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, China (2012), Centre for Policy Analysis (2011-12) and German Institute of Global and Area Studies at Hamburg, Germany (2009). Apart from regular popular media publications on politics, she writes on international relations and political economy of East Asia. Her two forthcoming works are: "East Asian Regionalism since 1997: China's Emerging Leadership" and "A Comparative Study of Power and Leadership Discourse in South Asia and East Asia".

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