



Chinese Defence Minister's Visit to India: Context and Outcomes

*Sanjeev Kumar**

Chinese Defence Minister General Liang Guanglie's recent visit to India from September 2 to 6, 2012 –the first by a Chinese Defence Minister in eight years, is a step forward in building mutual trust between the two countries. General Liang and his Indian counterpart A. K. Antony had an extensive exchange of views on defence and military exchanges and cooperation between the two countries, and both reached a consensus on significant issues of common concerns.

It is important to understand the domestic and geopolitical context in which the Chinese Defence Minister paid a visit to India. China's GDP grew by just 7.6 percent in the second quarter of 2012. It is the lowest registered since the first quarter of 2009. High economic growth is important for China since it adds to the domestic legitimacy of the Chinese government. Ethnic unrest in minority regions, especially Xinjiang and Tibet, has emerged as a significant challenge to the Chinese state in the last few years. The sacking of Chongqing's municipality Chief, Bo Xilai in March 2012 has exposed the factional politics between the reformers and hardliners within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Further, high-level leadership changes in both the CCP and the Chinese Government in late 2012 and early 2013 add to the overall sense of uncertainty in the country.

In the recent past, there has been a big debate in the Chinese media over the US 'rebalancing strategy' in the Asia-Pacific region and China's deteriorating relations with

neighbouring countries in the recent past. As it has been noted by a Chinese scholar, “since in all likelihood the future order in Asia Pacific depends on a contest between Beijing and Washington, China should readjust its diplomatic strategy with neighbours”. China exhibited an increasingly tough and assertive behavior towards many of its neighbours in the recent years, it became difficult for the world to deal with China. Beijing is facing a deteriorating security environment and its aggressive posture in the South China Sea has invited a strong response. It has been noted that factors like significance of Pakistan in China’s India policy and decline of China’s security presence in Myanmar have turned the tide somewhat. In this context, the debate in China suggests readjustment of diplomatic strategy with its neighbours as well as paying special attention to India’s diplomacy in view of New Delhi’s improved relations with the U.S., Japan and influence over ASEAN.

The Defence and Foreign Ministries of China have conducted a number of exchanges in 2012 with emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region. According to Chinese media reports, Chinese Defence officials have visited about 20 countries. General Liang visited Sri Lanka before coming to India and left for Laos from India. Ma Xioatian, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) took a tour to Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia and Singapore from September 3, 2012. Then Wu Shengli, PLA naval commander paid a visit to Turkey and the Deputy Chief of Staff of PLA navy visited Indonesia. The visits by senior PLA authorities can be seen as a part of its diplomacy to address concerns, particularly among China’s neighbours in the backdrop of larger Asia-Pacific theatre.

The highlight of General Liang’s India visit was his meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who noted, “India pays great importance to developing friendly relations with China and enhancing ties between the armed forces of two countries”. This statement reflects India’s commitment to maintain friendly relations with its northern neighbour.

The agreement between India and China to conduct the next round of joint military exercises ‘at the earliest’ is a welcome development. The first joint military exercise between the Indian Army and the PLA ‘Hand in Hand 2007’ was conducted at in China (Kunming). The second such exercise ‘Hand in Hand 2008’ was held in India (Belgaum) in 2008. However, these exercises were discontinued due to Chinese reluctance to issue a normal visa to a senior officer B. S. Jamwal of Indian Army posted in Jammu and Kashmir. It has now been reported that China

has started issuing normal visas to Indian armed forces personnel posted in Jammu and Kashmir for official visits to China.

India and China face multifaceted challenges linked to security of the seas. Indian Defence Minister A. K. Antony speaking at the 11th Shangri-La Dialogue (June 2012) noted, “The threats and challenges to maritime security and maritime freedoms arise from piracy, terrorism and organised crime and also from conflicting interests of countries”. The agreement to promote port calls by naval ships of the two countries and conduct joint maritime search and rescue operation is another important initiative agreed by the two defence ministers. The two sides agreed to enhance and strengthen cooperation between the naval forces in counter-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia. This will serve the interests of both sides; however, it is imperative that all states abide by universally agreed law and principles to guarantee maritime freedom. Both sides also agreed to strengthen border security cooperation between the border security forces, and the exchanges in personnel training, academic research and between educational institutions of armed forces of their respective sides.

China has hailed the visit of Defence Minister General Liang Guanglie to India as ‘successful’ and can be attributed to the Chinese domestic and geopolitical situations.

**Dr Sanjeev Kumar, Research Fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*