



President Pranab Mukherjee's Visit to China: Minimizing Differences, Maximizing Convergences

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The four-day state visit of Shri Pranab Mukherjee, President of India to China from 24 to 27 May 2016 – the first visit to China by an Indian President in six years, is significant. As per official pronouncements, the visit was aimed to discuss a whole range of bilateral issues covering political, economic, educational and people-to-people domain as well as regional and global issues of significance. The visit has demonstrated that the President had a holistic agenda to discuss and deliberate on a wide range of issues in China. The President termed his visit as well as discussions with Chinese leaders as “fruitful and productive”.¹

It is important to understand the political context in which Indian President has visited China. The visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to India (September 2014) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to China (May 2015) strengthened “closer development partnership” as a core component of the “strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity”. However, the bilateral relationship has also witnessed some irritants. In this context, the visit was intended to minimize differences and maximize convergence in the bilateral relationship. It may be noted that the visit was undertaken, two weeks prior to the significant visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the United States.

Generally, a visit by Indian President to a foreign country is regarded as ceremonial and symbolic. However, the visit of President Mukherjee to China proved to be more substantial and strategic in nature. Even Chinese sources acknowledged that the visit was far more than symbolic

given the political experience of President Mukherjee.² It is pertinent to note that Shri Pranab Mukherjee has been closely associated with the development of India-China relationship for more than three decades. He has long experience of interacting with Chinese leaders. He has visited China several times as India's Deputy Chairman of the then Planning Commission (1993), Defence Minister (2006), External Affairs Minister (2008), and Finance Minister (2011) before he became President of India in 2012. Significantly, the Chinese leadership recognizes Mukherjee's role as statesman who has contributed to building India-China ties over decades. President Xi Jinping referred to President Mukherjee as a "seasoned statesman" and "an old friend of China" just after his delegation level talks with the visiting President.¹ Thus, the Chinese leadership could easily engage with President Mukherjee. This was evident as immediately after President Mukherjee's summit meetings with the top Chinese leadership, Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar had an unscheduled meeting with the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi.

President Mukherjee's visit to China has been significant from two perspectives: (a) it was a conducive atmosphere and consensus building visit as far as current challenges in bilateral relations are concerned. (b) It presented a vision to broad base the relationship by increasing constituencies of support in both countries.

I

Consensus building visit

Guangzhou was chosen as the first destination of Indian President's visit primarily because of its historical connection, commercial contact and people-to-people exchanges with India. In Beijing, President Mukherjee held delegation level talks with President Xi Jinping, and Premier Li Keqiang. He also met Zhang Dejiang, Chairman of the National People's Congress and Li Yuanchao, Vice President of China.

During his delegation level talks with President Xi Jinping, President Mukherjee highlighted that the Indian side stands ready to further deepen bilateral relations, expand cooperation in fields such as trade and investment with the Chinese side, enhance people-to-people and cultural exchanges and conduct close communication and coordination on international affairs.

¹ China and India pledge peace in the border area, available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-05/27/content_25484925.htm

President Xi Jinping stressed that the two countries should maintain strategic communication and make good use of various bilateral dialogue mechanisms, and enhance mutual understanding and trust. The Chinese President called for advancing the construction of the Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor, jointly make the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank a professional financing platform and conclude the negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) at an early date.³ Significantly, the Chinese President expressed interest in discussing about “the docking of the ‘Act East’ initiative with the ‘Belt and Road’ initiative”.⁴ This proposal needs a critical examination.

During his delegation level talk with Premier Li Keqiang, President Mukherjee noted that both countries should further tap potential for cooperation in areas including trade and economy, investment, manufacturing, information technology and smart cities, enhance people-to-people and cultural exchanges, expand consensus and reduce differences in order to forge a closer development partnership. The Indian President welcomed greater Chinese investment into India, especially in its flagship programmes such as ‘Make in India’, ‘Digital India’, ‘Skill India’, ‘Smart Cities’.⁵ Premier Li Keqiang highlighted that both India and China should properly handle differences and strengthen coordination on major international and regional issues so that the development of China-India relations can be conducive to prosperity and progress in Asia as well as for world peace and stability.⁶ Further, Premier Li Keqiang suggested that the two sides align China's “Made in China 2025” campaign and “Internet Plus” initiative with India's “Make in India” initiative and “Digital India” campaign.⁷ This is an important suggestion which is expected to invite debate and discussion in the economic discourse of the two countries.²

During his talks with top Chinese leadership, President Mukherjee highlighted that terrorism respects neither ideology nor geographical boundaries and there is no good terrorist or bad terrorist. He highlighted need for comprehensive cooperation by all countries of the world to tackle this global menace. Replying to a question on listing the matter of UN Security Council 1267 committee, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson on May 27, 2016 stated that “the two sides exchanged views on anti-terrorism, recognizing terrorism as the common enemy of mankind. The two sides stand ready to step up anti-terrorism cooperation, and *enhance cooperation* under multilateral frameworks like the UN and BRICS to jointly uphold regional

²The authors of this paper had discussed these issues in their previous joint Issue Brief titled “China's Work Report, 13th Five Year Guideline and the Emerging Debate” Available at http://www.icwa.in/issue_briefs.html

security and stability”.⁸ The agreement on enhancing cooperation, including in the UN to counter terrorism could be seen as a step further.

Boundary is a core issue between India and China and the two countries have a number of boundary-related mechanisms including special representatives to deal with the issue. In an interview with Chinese media prior to his visit, President Mukherjee said that he is willing to find “a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable resolution” to the issue. In this context, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson noted “China is willing to continue working with India to accelerate negotiations and resolve the issue at an early date.” During his address at the Peking University, the President raised the boundary issue as a challenge in bilateral relations and noted “both sides should work with the aim of ensuring that we do not burden our coming generations by leaving our unresolved problems and differences to them” Both sides agreed to advance the ongoing boundary negotiations under the special representatives mechanism, and maintain peace and tranquility in the boundary regions. The emerging consensus on early settlement of boundary is noteworthy as Chinese leaders used to emphasize putting the border issue aside and deal with other issues, especially economic issues with priority.

India wants to join Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). The President conveyed that India plans to increase nuclear power generation and hoped that China will play a “positive and facilitating role” in a “predictable environment”. Xiao Qian, Director General of Asian region in China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the two leaders “agreed to strengthen cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy”.⁹ Shri S. Jaishankar, India’s Foreign Secretary was cited saying that that President Mukherjee requested President Xi to take “personal attention” on India’s efforts to balance its nuclear energy needs and climate change.¹⁰ So far, China has not expressed its support to India’s membership with the NSG.

President Mukherjee also held talks with Zhang Dejiang, Chairman of the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress. Both sides pledged their support for exchange and cooperation between the legislatures of the two countries.

India-China Business Forum

The day-long Business Forum at Guangzhou proved to be a platform of constructive bilateral economic dialogue. Zhu Xiaodan, Governor of Guangdong province, highlighted close cooperation and exchanges between Guangdong province of China and India. He emphasized

that the trade between Guangdong province of China and India amounted to \$ 14.4 billion in 2015, a growth of 15 per cent, accounting for one-fifth of India's total trade with China. The Governor stressed that “there is enormous potential for cooperation between Guangdong province of China and India”¹¹

Li Dongsheng, CEO, TCL Corporation, a participant at the forum stressed that Chinese companies need to follow a three-pronged strategy to do successful business in India. First, Chinese companies need to establish factories and do R&D in India to serve its local customer better rather than only selling its product in India. Second, establishing joint ventures with local businessmen may prove beneficial. And third, breakthrough is required in the field of Internet application in traditional industries and services in India. ³ The views of Li Dongsheng are logical as establishing manufacturing units in India by Chinese companies will prove beneficial in the era of ‘new normal’ in Chinese economy. In this context, it is noteworthy that *People’s Daily* published an article titled “Will 'Made in India' replace 'Made in China?’” on 25th May 2016. It was noted in the context of Apple and Foxconn’s interest to relocate their business production lines to India. However, the Chinese also believe that their manufacturing will likely to remain competitive for the time being primarily due to lack of developed industrial cluster and uncertainties in Indian market.¹²

The President highlighted the issue of market access for Indian products in the areas of drugs and pharmaceuticals, IT and IT related services and agro products at the India-China Business forum. The issue of market access for Indian products in China needs to be resolved to ensure balanced and sustainable trade. The following tables illustrate India’s rising trade deficit with China. It is critical for realising the development partnership between the two countries.

³ Li Dongsheng shared his views and events photos at the *Weibo* (Chinese social media) too.

India's Bilateral Trade and Deficit with China

USD billion

	Jan-Dec 2012	% growth	Jan-Dec 2013	% growth	Jan-Dec 2014	% growth	Jan-Dec 2015	% growth
Total India-China Trade	66.56	-9.93%	65.49	-1.61%	70.65	7.88	71.64	1.5
India's Exports to China	18.82	-19.61%	17.04	-9.43%	16.41	-3.72	13.38	-18.2
China's Exports to India	47.74	-5.43%	48.44	1.47%	54.24	11.95	58.25	7.4
Trade Deficit for India	-28.92		-31.40		-37.83		-44.87	18.6

Source: Chinese Customs

During his interaction with President Mukherjee, Hu Chunhua, Secretary of the provincial committee of the Chinese Communist Party of Guangdong, referred to the sister-province relationship between Guangdong and Gujarat as first such arrangement between India and China and spoke positively about his province's new linkages with Gujarat state of India.⁴ It may be noted that Guangdong and Gujarat are in the process of gradually expanding cooperation for mutual benefits.⁵ The Party Secretary hoped that both sides will strengthen friendly sister-province relations to promote the Sino-Indian relations towards a higher level to make a positive contribution.¹³

Communicating messages

President Mukherjee's visit highlighted national consensus within India to strengthened India-China ties. This was a prime message which he conveyed to the leadership as well as the larger audience in China. While addressing the Peking University, President Mukherjee stressed that political understanding between India and China is vital for a "closer developmental partnership" which could be achieved through "enhanced political communication".¹⁴ In his address at the

⁴ It may be noted that Gujarat state of India and Guangdong province of China had signed sister state/province agreement during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Ahmadabad in September 2014.

⁵ During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to China in May 2015, Smt Annadiben Patel, CM of Gujarat, who had accompanied the PM, had signed 12 MoUs for industrial and cultural promotion with Guangdong. In March 2016, an Action plan of mutual co-operation between Gujarat and Guangdong was signed in the presence of the Gujarat Chief Minister and Governor of Guangdong Province, Zhu Xiaodan at Gandhinagar.

Peking University, the President also raised the boundary issue. This was an attempt to share India's position and concern with various sections of the Chinese society including intellectuals and young generation of students.

At a meeting with Indian Community in Guangzhou, the President recalled his determined efforts as the Commerce Minister of India to support China's admission to the WTO. This was a time when the US and other Western countries were opposing China's entry to the international trade body.

The President also highlighted India's early recognition of the People's Republic of China in December 1949, as well as India's constant public support through the 1960s and 1970s for the admission of the People's Republic of China to the UN and UNSC. This was the time when the international community, especially non-socialist states including neighbours were apprehensive about China's ambitions. The President 'message' to China can be understood in the context of India's aspiration, for permanent membership on a reformed UNSC, a legitimate expectation.

II

Broad basing constituencies of support in both countries

Important bilateral relations between major powers, like India and China, need people's support. In his speech at the Peking University, the President highlighted that "a qualitative transformation of our ties calls for placing people at the very centre". He outlined a pragmatic vision of people-centric partnership with China and suggested eight steps to realize this goal: enhancing mutual trust and mutual respect; expanding youth exchanges; promoting greater cooperation and co-production of audio-visual media; fostering greater intellectual and cultural exchanges; expanding tourism contacts; encouraging greater civil society interaction on developmental challenges; stronger cooperation in multilateral fora and broader trade and investment ties. These are extremely important suggestions for broadening constituencies of support in two countries.⁶

There is no doubt that India China relations are one of the most important relationships

⁶ In recent past, ICWA has specifically focused on this topic. This was one of the main agenda of ICWA delegation which visited China recently to interact with its counterpart institutions in Beijing and Shanghai.

for both countries in the 21st century. The relationship has witnessed an incremental progress. However, there is a gap between the expectations of top leadership of both countries and expectation of the people. The President noted that the Governments have a primary role, but the efforts of think tanks, academia, civil society, cultural icons and artists are “equally important”. There is a need to nurture constituencies of support in both countries. Therefore, a bottom up approach involving people from various section of society from both countries becomes essential. More regular contacts and exchanges are required at official and non official levels.

Media has an important role in shaping bilateral ties and it is a “public space” in both countries. The two countries should cover more news about each other in their respective media sources. Popular TV programmes can be dubbed in each other languages and broadcast locally. Further, Social media is becoming an important “public space”, especially among the young people. This public space could be used for creativity and positive dialogue.

The President also called to broaden contacts from beyond the Capitals to provincial and local bodies. During PM Modi’s visit to China, both sides had established India China State/Provincial leaders’ forum. Now, there is need to extend these exchanges to local bodies. These are important because both countries have substantial rural populations.

The President rightly noted that development experience of India and China is most relevant to each other. It is pertinent to argue that India and China need to learn from each others’ developmental experiences as no other two countries are facing similar problems. Issues like industrial development, migration, rural poverty, urbanization, income inequality, education, social welfare and housing are important for both countries and they offer opportunities to cooperate and exchange experiences.

Educational and other exchanges

Promoting educational exchanges was an important agenda of the visit. President Mukherjee addressed the roundtable conference of Vice-Chancellors/ Presidents of universities from India and China at the Peking University. This was a new and important initiative. The President called for a greater collaboration between academic communities of India and China for mutual benefit. He witnessed the signing of Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) between ten universities of India and China to create a “collaborative platform for academic cooperation in the areas of research and education, joint seminars and exchange of faculty and students”.¹⁵ The collaborative

research projects with Chinese institutions on a particular topic could lead to better understanding of issues and mutual learning.

Nalanda University and Peking University agreed to establish a Xuanzang Centre for Asian Studies at Nalanda University (as per the provisions of their MoU), commemorating the contribution of Xuanzang in fostering the cultural linkage and educational contact between India and China.⁷

It seems that the MoU signed between universities took note of regional educational disparity in both countries and they are aimed to fill the knowledge gap in relatively backward regions by exchanging students and teachers of elite institutions. For instance, the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Delhi, a top class institution in India, has signed MoU with Chang'an University, ranked 100th in Chinese University ranking system and located in relatively less developed region of China.¹⁶ Another example is MoU signed between Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU), Shanghai and IIT, Bhubaneswar. The SJTU, situated in Shanghai, is well known for its scientific research and ranked 4th in China while IIT Bhubaneswar is a newly established IIT.¹⁷ The MoU between Nalanda University and Peking University is another such example.

Further, the two countries have rich traditions of diverse artistic practices. During his visit to China, President Mukherjee met famous Chinese artist Han Meilin, Chinese contemporary sculptor Wu Weishan, Lead actor of the film, Xuanzang (the first Sino-India co-production) Huang Xiaoming.

Importantly, China agreed to gradually extend the scale of pilgrims for Kailash Mansarover Yatra in Tibet through Nathu La mountain pass. In the past, the Chinese government has allowed a small number of pilgrims due to infrastructure limitations. The new consensus is a welcome development which will strengthen people-to-people exchanges.

In conclusion, the visit of President Mukherjee has been successful in creating a conducive atmosphere between the two countries and consensus building on different bilateral, regional and

⁷ Apart from these two, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, Central University of Gujarat, Visvesvaraya, National Institute of Technology, Nagpur and the Indian Institute of Technology, Bhubaneswar signed MoUs with Chang'an University, East China University of Political Science and Law, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Jinan University, Beijing Normal University, Hunan University, Southwest University for Nationalities, Jiangsu University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

global issues. The consensus on “enhancing cooperation” in various fields will bear fruit probably during the upcoming G-20 Summit in Hangzhou in September and the BRICS summit in Goa in October 2016 when the two countries will find opportunity to continue their bilateral dialogue. The people-centric partnership aimed to qualitatively enhance the bilateral relationship by broad basing constituencies of support in both countries is another important contribution of the visit, which will bear fruit in the process of time.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of authors and do not reflect the views of the Council.

Endnotes:

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⁸ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on May 27, 2016, available at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1367358.shtml

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¹² “Will 'Made in India' replace 'Made in China?'”, *China Daily*, May 25, 2016 (Accessed on May 26, 2016) available at <http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0525/c90000-9063043.html>

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¹⁴ Speech by President of India Shri Pranab Mukherjee at the Peking University available <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/speeches-detail.htm?527>, accessed on 30 May 2016.

¹⁵Speech by President of India Shri Pranab Mukherjee at the Peking University available <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/speeches-detail.htm?527>, accessed on 30 May 2016

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¹⁷ Ibid