



Indian External Affairs Minister's Visit to China with a Holistic Agenda

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The visit of External Affairs Minister of India, Smt. Sushma Swaraj to China, the first by a Cabinet Minister of the new government in Delhi, from January 31 to February 3, 2015 is significant for bilateral ties. The visit was important from two perspectives; first, it sets 'the tone for our agenda of engagement with China' and second, it generated significant debate on the issues raised by her speeches at the launch of the second 'India-China Media Forum' and at the inauguration of 'Visit India Year 2015'. The visit demonstrated that the External Affairs Minister had a holistic agenda, which not only included bilateral and trilateral talks on strategic, political and economic issues, but also highlighted other significant issues, such as tourism and people-to-people contacts and laid the groundwork for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to China in May 2015.

The External Affairs Minister held bilateral talks with her counterpart Mr. Wang Yi and also participated in the 13th Russia-India-China's Foreign Ministers' Trilateral Meeting in Beijing. Smt. Sushma Swaraj also called on President Xi Jinping, who expressed full confidence in India-China relations and hoped that 'new progress' would be made in the bilateral ties.

The External Affairs Minister's speech at the launch of second 'India-China Media Forum' has set the stage for India's future engagements with China. She noted that India and China are seeking to take 'economic cooperation to a qualitatively new level'. The proposed Chinese investments in Industrial Parks in India and collaboration in railways are initiatives in the right direction and converge with the 'Make in India' programme launched by the new government. Certainly, there is a need to seriously address the issue of India's huge trade deficit with China and diversify economic relations as well as the basket of commodity of trade between India and China.

The External Affairs Minister has proposed a pragmatic and realistic engagement with China and has suggested six-point template to build the relationship. These are: Action-oriented approach, broad-based bilateral engagement, convergence on common regional and global interests, developing new areas of cooperation, expanding strategic communication, and fulfilling common aspirations to usher in the Asian Century. Put differently, a rational framework has been laid out for the future direction of India-China relations. The six-point template shows India's commitment to cooperative partnership with China and to shape the Asian Century. Now the real test of diplomacy would be to reach consensus on each other's core concerns, aspirations and sensitivities through intense dialogue.

On the boundary question, Smt. Sushma Swaraj said that 'my government is committed to exploring an early settlement'. Knowing that boundary is a core issue between India and China, the visiting minister's statement highlights the need to intensify the process of boundary settlement. Understandably, the issue has aroused significant debate in China as well as in India. China's state-run newspaper *Global Times*, on February 10, quoted Smt. Sushma Swaraj's statement on boundary and also acknowledged that strong leaders from the two countries are keen on an 'out of box settlement'. The newspaper also highlighted that Smt. Sushma Swaraj and her Chinese counterpart 'reached a consensus that the resolution of border dispute should not be left to future generations'. This is an important outcome of the visit as Chinese leaders used to emphasise putting the border issue aside and deal with economic issues with priority.

The External Affairs Minister's visit to China also highlighted the significance of people-to-people contacts in many ways. While speaking at the inauguration of 'Visit India Year 2015', she stressed that 'people to people contacts play a major role in strengthening the relations between two nations'. In this context, opening of an additional route through Nathula Pass for Kailash Mansarovar Yatra is a noteworthy initiative. After all, critically important bilateral relations, such as India-China, require broad-based support of people in both countries. Further, both countries agreed to boost tourism cooperation to strengthen people-to-people contacts.

The Foreign Ministers' Meeting of Russia-India-China Trilateral has become an important platform to build consensus on regional and global issues. Russia and China welcomed India's participation in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and India's application for full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Further, it is significant that a consensus emerged among the three countries on Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism, first proposed by India at the United Nations in 1996. It could be said that after accepting Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism, there can be no justification for any act of terrorism in the region affecting the three countries. On the issue of Afghanistan, the trilateral forum supported the 'core coordinating role' of the UN in promoting peace and stability in that country. Arguably, India's position on Afghanistan is quite similar to that of China, and both are not keen on deploying their forces in Afghanistan. However, the countries have different stances over Taliban in Afghanistan.

The bilateral, regional and global significance of India-China relations are enormous. The maiden visit of External Affairs Minister Smt. Sushma Swaraj to China has proposed a logical framework for India's bilateral engagement with China and has set the stage for making Prime Minister Modi's proposed visit to China 'outcome driven'. The enhanced coordination and cooperation between India and China could play a critical role in the realisation of the Asian Century.

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