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What draws Modi to China

By M K Bhadrakumar

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What readily comes to mind are the lyrics of the famous Frank Sinatra song. Watching the "falling leaves drift by the window ... I see your lips, the summer kisses/The sunburned hands I used to hold ..."

These wistful lines of infinite longing tinged by nostalgia would characterize the American feelings as India's dalliance with China gets seriously under way on Wednesday afternoon on the banks of the ancient Sabarmati river in the western state of Gujarat where Chinese president Xi Jinping arrives and India's prime minister Narendra Modi is at hand to receive him personally.

Wednesday also happens to be Modi's birthday and Gujarat is his home state and the symbolism of what Xi is doing cannot be lost on the American mind.

The widespread expectation in India and abroad had been that the government led by Modi would maintain "continuity" in India's foreign policy.

That was expected to be in the direction of galvanizing further India's tilt toward the United States through the past decade of rule under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's leadership, who was acclaimed to be the most "pro-American" leader India ever had since it became independent 67 years ago.

As recently as end-July, the new External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj affirmed, "We think that foreign policy is in continuity. Foreign policy does not change with the change in the government."

Indeed, India's political culture seldom admits abrupt policy shifts. Maturity and sobriety are synonymous with continuity in the Indian culture, imbued with respect for the past.

However, one hundred days into the Modi government, it is becoming impossible to maintain the facade.

Navigating through three high-level exchanges in rapid succession through September - with Japan, China and the United States - Modi is casting away rather summarily the lingering pretensions as if dead leaves in an autumnal month.

Modi's compulsive innovation is self-evident. Some of it may be organic, seasonal, locally sourced and even ethnically produced, but the pride in making the events stand out from the past is unmistakable - such as the stunning decision to receive Xi Jinping at Ahmedabad airport.

It seems those who spoke about 'continuity' didn't know Modi's mind, while he himself has not cared to present a doctrinaire foreign policy.

But then, this is still work in progress and Modi cannot be faulted for not explaining his road map. Besides, he's taciturn by nature - except when inspired by the sight of India's teeming millions.

Modi has gleefully inherited the two key anchor sheets of India's foreign policy - primacy on economic diplomacy and strategic autonomy.

On the other hand, under him, there has been a discernible shift in deploying strategic autonomy no longer as a 'stand-alone' pillar but as purposive underpinning for economic diplomacy.

Second, Modi has sifted the locus of economic diplomacy - and India's leanings toward the Western world that went under that rubric through the past decade in foreign policy domain - away from the West to Asia.

Modi is due to visit the US in exactly twelve days from now. But there is nothing of the American rhetoric that used to mark a Manmohan Singh visit to the White House.

An idea was thought of initially to propitiate Modi by granting him the privilege of addressing the US Congress. But it has been quietly shelved.

All this certainly needs some explanation.

The heart of the matter is that there had been a pronounced 'militarization' of India's strategic

outlook through the past 10-15 years, which was a period of high growth in the economy that seemed to last forever.

In those halcyon days, geopolitics took over strategic discourses and pundits reveled in notions of India's joint responsibility with the United States, the sole superpower, to secure the global commons and the 'Indo-Pacific'.

The underlying sense of rivalry with China - couched in 'cooperation-cum-competition', a diplomatic idiom borrowed from the Americans - was barely hidden.

Then came the financial crisis and the Great Recession of 2008 that exposed real weaknesses in the Western economic and political models and cast misgivings about their long-term potentials.

Indeed, not only did the financial crisis showcase that China and other emerging economies could weather the storm better than western developed economies but were actually thriving.

The emerging market economies such as India, Brazil or Indonesia began to look at China with renewed interest, tinged with an element of envy.

Suffice to say, there has been an erosion of confidence in the Western economic system and the Washington Consensus that attracted Manmohan Singh.

From a security-standpoint, this slowed down the India-US 'strategic partnership'. The blame for stagnation has been unfairly put on the shoulders of a "distracted" and dispirited Barack Obama administration and a 'timid' and unimaginative Manmohan Singh government.

Whereas, what happened was something long-term - the ideology prevalent in India during much of the United Progressive Alliance rule, namely, that the Western style institutions and governments are the key to development in emerging economies, itself got fundamentally tarnished.

What we in India overlook is that the 2008 financial crisis has also been a crisis of Western-style democracy. There has been a breakdown of faith in the Western economic and political models.

In the Indian context, the growing dysfunction of governance, widening disparity in income and the rising youth employment combined to create a sense of gloom and drift as to what democracy can offer and it in turn galvanized the demand for change.

Curiously, through all this, it became evident that the mixed economies and 'non-democratic' political systems, especially China, weathered the storm far better. Indeed, Modi visited China no less than four times during this period.

Image and reality

Something also needs to be said in this backdrop about Modi's intriguing political personality. He is not really the one-dimensional man that he is made out to be.

The mismatch between image and reality is creating problems for his detractors and acolytes alike in this past 100-day period of his stewardship.

And as time passes, it may become increasingly difficult for the Left to demonize him, or for the Far Right to perform liturgical rites to this celebrant.

Modi's non-elitist social background, his intimate familiarity with the ugliness and humiliation of poverty and ignorance, his intuitive knowledge of the Indian people and above all his keen sense of destiny ("God chooses certain people to do the difficult work. I believe god has chosen me for this work.") - all this comes into play here, setting him apart from his predecessors in India's ruling elite.

By no means was it accidental that he highlighted human dignity as a vector of development in his famous Independence Day speech in New Delhi on August 15.

Nor is it to be overlooked that his emphasis is on attracting as much foreign investment as possible for projects that could create large-scale job opportunities for the people while pointedly ignoring the WalMart as India's pilot project for attracting foreign investment.

One of the early foreign-policy decisions taken by Modi - interestingly, soon after his return from the BRICS summit at Brazil in July - was to draw the 'red line' on how far India would go in accommodating the West's desperate full-throttle push for a new WTO regime.

Modi has so far held on to the firm line that India cannot be party to a trade regime that doesn't adequately safeguard India's food security. The fact is, the lives of several hundreds millions of Indians hang by this slender thread of the government subsidy for food distribution.

The Americans were stunned, because he was meant to be a darling of the multi-national companies and corporate industry and not a 'populist' leader catering to the masses. But Modi remained adamant.

The bitterness comes out in the blistering attacks since then in the Western media about Modi. The Financial Times wrote in the weekend that the MNCs' "honeymoon" with Modi is over.

In sum, Modi visualizes Asian partners to be much more meaningful interlocutors at this point in time for meeting India's needs. Modi believes what he said in Tokyo recently, "if the 21st century is an Asian century, then Asia's future direction will shape the destiny of the world."

China seizes the day

China has shrewdly assessed Modi's national priorities and sees in them a window of opportunity to transform the relationship with India into one of genuine partnership.

In comparison, Japan stalks China wherever the latter goes, but its actual capacity to match China is in serious doubt. Also, in the ultimate analysis, Japanese businessmen go only when conditions are perfect - unlike his Chinese or South Korean counterparts.

As for the US and the European countries, they are yet to figure out a way to catch Modi's attention span with an idea that is attuned to his development agenda.

In any case, the Western economies are still on recovery path and their interest in the Indian market has traditionally devolved upon boosting their own civil or military exports, rather than help India build its manufacturing industry or develop its infrastructure.

In sum, neither the Western countries nor Japan can hope to match the scale of involvement that China is offering - setting up industrial parks, making the creaking Indian railway system work and so on.

The Chinese offer to invest US\$50 billion in the first instance for the upgrade of the Indian railways speaks for itself.

Put differently, Modi has redefined India's strategic autonomy.

In the changed circumstances, strategic autonomy goes far beyond a matter of India's aversion toward 'bloc mentality' or, specifically speaking, its diffidence in the authenticity and sustainability of the US rebalance in its Asian strategy.

It may seem a paradox but under Modi, strategic autonomy increasingly presents itself as the key underpinning to create a level playing field for India's partnership with China.

Make no mistake, the opening up of sensitive sectors like railways or ports for the Chinese companies demands a certain security mindset and Modi is surely taking a leap of faith.

The best outcome will be that as India and China get engaged deeply and extensively, they realize that they indeed have so very much in common by way of shared interest while clawing their way up on the greasy pole of the world order, where the lessons of history amply testify that established powers do not easily concede space to newcomers.

On the other hand, an irreducible minimum would also be that India and China settle pragmatically for maintaining peace and tranquility at all costs on their disputed borders without which a smooth and steady expansion of fruitful cooperation becomes problematic.

Therefore, Modi is justified in calculating that either way India is a net beneficiary in this historic gambit to break fresh ground with China. It is, actually, a 'win-win' gambit.

To be sure, there are obstacles. The Indian bureaucracy, the defense and security establishment, right wing nationalists and a public weaned on official propaganda regarding the border dispute - these constituents look startled and disoriented.

But then, on India's political horizon if there is any leader who can force-march them, it is Modi. What gives hope is that his own leadership is vitally linked to his capacity to deliver on the economic front.

Indeed, if he succeeds, India's foreign policies will have changed beyond recognition.

Audacious expectations

The new stirrings already speculate on a border settlement with China in a conceivable future. Up until four months ago, this would have seemed audacious, given that the border dispute is a highly complicated backlog of past and current history. Bold ideas are often born that way.

Evidently, all this will not mean that history has ended. The Indian and Chinese models of development will forever present a fascinating study in comparison and contrast.

The modernization of India's military can be trusted to remain a continuing priority even if the country faces no danger of external aggression.

Equally, India will continue to diversify its external relations and will not put all its eggs in the Chinese basket in the Asia-Pacific.

Most certainly, India's belief that it has a leadership role to play in its region is not going to be bartered away.

However, the bottom line is that these templates of foreign policy could become truly relevant only if the country got rid of the curse of poverty. India's influence in the region and its standing as a global player would ultimately depend on its comprehensive national strength and the example it sets as a peace-loving emerging power by creating a just and fair society.

Thus, through a corridor of time spanning a decade or two at any rate, the development agenda should get unquestioned primacy. This is where Modi is far-sighted in reorienting India's foreign policy.

A big question remains: Will Modi be allowed to get away with his road map for India? The history of the modern world is replete with instances of predatory capitalism by the Western world interfering, if need be, to enforce course correction in developing countries that show signs of deviation.

India, again, is a very big fish in the pond and cannot be allowed to get away easily.