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Two Steps Forward One Step Back (II)

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The Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to India had two sharply diverging halves. If the first part that was enacted in Ahmedabad presented the spectacle of an extraordinary breakthrough in the relations between the two countries, the second half was carefully choreographed to correct that very impression and instead aimed to show, as an establishment commentator put it, that the Narendra Modi government is not lacking in «the political will to look a more powerful neighbor in the eye».

It is extraordinary that a course correction of that sort was necessitated at all in the middle of a hugely-important high-level visit by a Chinese leader. The «Ahmedabad spirit» almost vanished

already and become a distant memory by the time the talks ended in Delhi the next day in the afternoon. There have been reports since then that Prime Minister Narendra Modi warned Xi during the Delhi chapter of the visit that «the much-touted economic cooperation» devolving upon large-scale Chinese investment in India «would not take off as long as border tensions persisted».

There is clearly an attempt on the part of the establishment commentators to project that it has been a misperception that Modi was «soft» on China, whereas, the truth is that he is hard as nail, «unlike the erstwhile United Progressive Alliance government, which was forever trying to second-guess China and reacting with a spectacular measure of defensiveness».

Part of the reason for this grandstanding is that the opposition Congress Party has lost no time to allege that the Modi government has failed to forcefully take up the Chinese incursions on the border with President Xi.

But the heart of the matter is that Modi has also come under compulsion to bridge the hiatus that was developing between him and his own supporters following the growing perception that he was offering a level playing field for Chinese business to operate in the Indian market in his keenness to draw Chinese investments into large projects with potential for job creation, whereas it cannot be overlooked that China still remains India's number one adversary in strategic terms.

Somehow, the widespread opinion in India is that at this point in time in geopolitical terms, China needs India rather than the other way around. Put differently, the Indian analysts of the power dynamic in the Asia-Pacific estimate that China faces isolation in the region while India on the contrary is a much-sought after partner by the countries of the region – especially Japan, Vietnam and Australia – in their drive to offset China's lengthening shadows.

The Indian pundits visualize that China is paranoid about an emergent «Delhi-Tokyo-Canberra axis that would also have the tacit backing of the United States of America». The visits by President Pranab Mukherjee and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj to Vietnam, Modi's high-profile visit to Japan, the visit by the Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott to New Delhi and Modi's own current visit to the US – all taking place within the space of some 4-6 weeks – can be seen from this perspective.

To be sure, it could not have escaped China's attention that the US continues to view India as a «natural ally» despite the sense of stagnation in the partnership between the two countries in the recent period. Modi has received adulation from Japan, Australia and the US and they seek to draw India into a multilateral alliance of «democratic countries» in the Asia-Pacific region. The Japanese Prime Minister has openly espoused a «democratic security diamond» with the US, Australia and India.

Without doubt, President Barack Obama can be expected to reach out to Modi during the latter's visit to Washington this weekend to persuade him to align India's strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific with the US' rebalance strategy. The former US undersecretary of state Nicholas Burns underlined recently that the US' strategic interests in the 21-st century align more closely with India's than with those of any other continental Asian power, which makes India central to

America's rebalance strategy in Asia.

Suffice to say, the Chinese strategists cannot but be agonizing over the implications of deeper ties between India on the one hand and Japan and the US on the other as well as their trilateral cooperation. Japan, in fact, has mooted the idea of a 2+2 meeting with India at the level of foreign and defence ministers and for strengthening the trilateral strategic dialogue between the US, Japan and India.

From this perspective, China displayed a determination to engage Modi as a counter-strategy with a view to preventing the rivalry between the two countries from intensifying. Beijing seems confident that it can reconcile Modi's ambitions with regard to his development agenda for India, since China can understand and satisfy Modi's needs far better than Japan or the US. Of course, China also appreciates India's determination to uphold its strategic autonomy in Asia's shifting geopolitical landscape.

China has been quick to sense that since Modi's rise to power in May, a reassessment of China has picked up pace in Delhi, given the new prime minister's economic priorities as much as his worldview. On Wednesday, Modi held a highly-publicized event in Delhi to project the new catchword – 'Make in India'. The Modi government sees that a big involvement of China in this jobs focus is almost unavoidable, as apparent from the decision to identify those sectors and regions where there could be security implications but to throw open the rest of the economy to Chinese investment with a clear-cut policy. Thus, railways and ports, which have so far been off-limits to Chinese businesses are now open for Chinese investment and the Modi government has even removed the 49 percent cap on foreign direct investment in railways.

China also would have taken note that Modi draws inspiration from Asian nationalism and this ideological tilt means that under his leadership India would adopt a genuinely independent foreign policy by abandoning the «pro-Western» outlook of the previous UPA government led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Modi has visited China four times and neither side cared to hide that they have long liked each other. Even in objective terms, the global financial crisis has driven home in the Indian mind that the «unipolar moment» in world politics, which was characteristic of the early phase of the post-Cold War era, has become history. All this would combine to mean that India has fundamental difficulties in identifying with the US approach of containing China.

In sum, what Xi's visit brings out is that despite the discordant note struck by the military standoff along the border, a spirit of cooperation nonetheless prevailed and both leaders have been pragmatic.

To be sure, the border issue will continue to hinder the progress of cooperation and the trust deficit is not going to be easy to disperse in the absence of a settlement. It is a catch-22 situation insofar while Delhi never tires of interest in resolving the border dispute with China at an early date, the facts remain that a «fair and reasonable» border settlement involves give and take in a spirit of compromise and the public opinion in the country needs to be prepared for it but it is such an effort on the part of the government that is precisely lacking.

If the premise so far has been that a strong leader like Modi can push through a border settlement with China, the acrimony surrounding the military standoff currently and the government's need to do grandstanding to placate the public opinion raises question marks over making such a sweeping assertion.

On balance, however, the big story of the outcome of Xi's India visit is that it is two steps forward one step back for the India-China relationship. The good part is that it could have been 'One step forward two steps back', but wasn't. Most certainly, the Indian pundits are daydreaming about the power dynamic in the Asia-Pacific -- ASEAN sees China as a driver of growth; Australia regards China as its "most important relationship"; Vietnam has a highly nuanced relationship with China that criss-crosses government-to-government and party-to-party level.

The bottom line is that the US is a power in decline and it is hopelessly distracted in several theatres with insufficient energy or resources to push a highly challenging strategy such as its pivot to Asia. Modi sees that China's rise, Russia's re-emergence and the growing multipolarity in the world order as compelling realities of the contemporary world situation.