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India and China profess brotherhood

By Sreeram Chaulia
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On the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, multi-page color supplements in Indian dailies showcased its giant strides in industry, commerce and technology.

Fronted with a special message from the Chinese ambassador to India, these advertorial-like releases waxed eloquent about the rising volumes of bilateral trade and mutual investment, including quotes from Chinese honchos that they are committed to India's economic development.

The splash and splendor of the supplements, which included a preview of Expo 2010 in Shanghai and a mention of mushrooming Confucius Institutes, typified the enlarged Chinese efforts to mould public opinion [in India](#).

Joshua Kurlantzick of [the New Republic](#) maintains that China's soft power "charm offensive" is "transforming the world". In India, though, the massive Chinese [investment](#) in [public relations](#) has not easily transformed the cagey news-consuming public.

From the older generation of Indians who can remember the calamity of the 1962 border war with China to a younger lot who wish that India could compete and surpass China in economic and military greatness, there are few takers of the publicity blitzes of the [Chinese](#) mission in India, which is known to befriend and shower lavish favors on selected media persons.

The 60th anniversary newspaper supplements proudly declare that the era of *Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai* (Indians and Chinese are brothers) "is deeply rooted in the hearts of the two peoples". But they make short shrift of the permanently intractable border dispute, now subject to the 13th round of bilateral talks, which is a legacy of the failure of that very era.

A stock response of Chinese diplomats about how the two countries could enjoy a "strategic

partnership" amid rising political tensions is to cast blame on spoilers allegedly rupturing the bilateral "harmony". The implication of such comments is that a small minority of "China-bashers" (insinuated as pro-Western) is projecting horror stories of otherwise cooperative relations.

But the Pew Global Attitudes Surveys show that the percentage of Indian respondents with negative feelings about China rose from 20% in 2002 to 43% in 2007. A 2008 poll by the same organization found that 62% of Indians considered China's growing [military power](#) a "bad thing" and 45% of them rated China's growing economy the same way. These figures summarize a massive trust deficit that no amount of sugarcoating can sweep under the carpet.

Appearances of bonhomie are proving a hard sell as tensions are rising both along the 3,500 kilometer border and in symbolic verbal exchanges over territorial rights and threats. In May 2009, when the then chief of the Indian Air Force, Fali Homi Major, dubbed China "certainly a greater threat than Pakistan", it resonated with Indian public opinion in general. Likewise, the British Sunday Times reported on the eve of the [60th anniversary](#) of the Communist Revolution that "not everyone in Beijing speaks in the silky language of the foreign ministry [and] the enemy most often spoken of is India".

The bitterness has been reinforced in recent times by a running semantic battle of wits between the two countries. For all the homilies of good neighborliness, China has of late not shied away from reasserting its claims over India's northeastern parts - specifically Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim.

In May 2008, China officially resurrected an old claim over the Finger Point area in northern Sikkim after apparently renouncing it in 2003. In June, Beijing unsuccessfully attempted to block Asian Development [Bank](#) (ADB) funds to India on the grounds that they included \$60 million worth of projects for the "disputed area" of Arunachal.

The Sino-Indian equation is so terribly dotted with sleeping dogs being roused for strategic warfare that Beijing kept lobbying the ADB and secured a consolation victory in August. With the backing of Japan, Australia and some Southeast Asian states, China won a narrow vote preventing the bank from formally acknowledging Arunachal as part of India in the "Disclosure Agreement" that notifies new projects.

This diplomatic shadowboxing has kept in step with Indian strategists' contentions that Chinese cross-border incursions have been escalating year by year. According to Professor Brahma Chellaney, India's leading China specialist, "Chinese cross-border forays nearly doubled from 140 in 2006 to 270 in 2008 and have kept that level in 2009."

Polemical clashes between Beijing and New Delhi reached a high point just as China was unveiling its 60th anniversary fanfare. Indian authorities discovered that the Chinese embassy in Delhi is issuing visas on separate sheets of paper for Indian applicants domiciled in Jammu & Kashmir state. All other Indian citizens wishing to [travel to China](#) get their passports stamped directly, but Indian Kashmiri students and businesspersons have been given "stapled visas" for the past few weeks.

India's Ministry of External Affairs says that it has "taken a serious view" of the matter since the implication is that China is questioning the legality of Kashmir's accession to India (another old row that was seemingly resolved in the 1990s).

Interestingly, the just-published monthly statement of the Indian Home Ministry refers to [progress](#) on road construction "on the Indo-Tibetan border". This is a departure from the standard Indian formulation for decades of the "India-China border".

For years, Indian strategic elites have argued that Tibet is a card that India must play to offset Chinese irredentism. Much to their chagrin, Indian policymakers in government have avoided reopening the [folder](#) on Tibet's status, inviting a chorus of dissenting voices chiding them for "spinelessness".

Professor Chellaney has even drawn an analogy that bolsters the Indian case for questioning China's control over Tibet. He avers that China is "doing a Taiwan" on Arunachal, that is, attempting to grab Indian territory via the ethnic Tibetan character of some of India's northeastern states, and adding another "reunification with the mainland" agenda item.

For Indian thinkers, Delhi must turn China's core claim over Tibet into an issue in order to ultimately defend Arunachal or Sikkim. Already outmatched by China's military buildup on its side of the border, Indian strategists worry that remaining "sheepish" on Tibet is to be pushed permanently on the back foot.

On Wednesday, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh congratulated China for the 60th anniversary as an "important milestone" of a "great nation".

Formalities aside, the real message India appears to be sending is that the Communist Revolution and its custodians are only welcome if they respect Indian sovereignty and reciprocate the solicitousness that Delhi believes it has accorded. Booming trade after all, is no substitute for respect in international relations.