Some Observations on Wen Jiabao’s Forthcoming Visit to India

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Rise of China has become the buzzword in the international scenario today. Every action appears to be a reaction to this development. The visit of the American President Obama to India is also being viewed through this lens. In addition, the declaration of the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao’s scheduled visit to India by the end of this year has further established the fact that it is necessary for India as well as the international community to positively engage China. There is definitely a need for cooperation rather than competition. Prime Minister Singh has asserted that there is enough space for both the countries to grow side by side without any conflict. But one needs to pause and think whether this is possible. Whether there can be any fruitful outcome from such meetings, and is the current leadership in a position to have a concrete solution to the issues which can become a reason for future conflict.

The top most on this list would be the existing border conflict. There is an urgent need for both sides to cooperate and find a mutually acceptable solution to the lingering border issue, which is a major factor behind the general perception of mistrust and animosity between both the countries. With further strengthening of the Chinese military and the economy this may not be a possibility. Past few years have witnessed a major turn in the way China has been asserting herself on the border issues. The ongoing claims on the Indian territory of Arunachal Pradesh are a pointer. There also have been incidents of incursion by the Chinese army within the Indian border. For any future cooperation to be effective this issue needs an urgent solution.

Second, the ‘all weather friendship’ which Beijing shares with Pakistan also acts as a dampener. China has been instrumental in the nuclear build up of Pakistan. The growing closeness between
these two neighbours has always been a matter of concern for India. The increasing Chinese clout in the international order has further complicated the situation. New Delhi has always perceived that China has been coming to Pakistan’s aid as it has always wanted to balance India’s rise. On the other hand, the growing Chinese presence in the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) is also a matter of concern for New Delhi.

Third point will be the growing Chinese influence in India’s neighbourhood. China has been consistently trying to increase its presence in the Indian Subcontinent. Bilateral activities like port building, arms sale, aid diplomacy are being undertaken with full commitment by the Chinese side. The increasing influence of China in countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh is quite a concern for India.

Fourth factor is the growing closeness which India shares with the United States. China has always been concerned with this increasing cooperation and the successful signing of the Civil Nuclear deal has further aggravated the Chinese unease. It would not be farfetched to argue that Wen Jiabao’s visit is more of a reaction to the visit by President Obama.

The domestic opinion in both the countries is not that positive when one attempts to look for a possible solution. The decision makers know that any attempt to solve the border issue will involve certain amount of compromise, an act which will become quite difficult to justify. India, being a democracy, no party will undertake any such effort as it is a sure shot way to lose public support. On the other hand, the Chinese Communist Party is facing a lot of problems at the domestic level and it would not be interested in undertaking any action which will further lead to trouble diluting its legitimacy to govern.

With so many existing roadblocks it is quite difficult for the leadership to come any decision. The proposed meeting is being hyped up with huge amount of optimism but what actually will be come out of this is not quite clear. There is a need for the Indians and the Chinese to meet and discuss the issues which are becoming a problem for smooth diplomatic functioning. This meeting though will not be anything more than a eye wash as China is poised at the threshold of a change in the leadership and, thus, very soon the decision making power will be shifting. Thus any decision made during this visit may only be transient.
In spite of all the problems and the possibility of any quick fix solution, such meetings should take place more often between these two neighbours. India and China have the problem of not understanding the functioning of each other and such drawback can be removed only if both the parties attempts to interact and understand the dynamics at play.

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