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Modi Transforms India-China Relations (I)

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A well-known columnist of the Forbes magazine who writes on China, titled his article on Tuesday, «Who Sabotaged Chinese President Xi Jinping's India Visit?» If Eric Meyer didn't even want to have second thoughts as to whether there was indeed a 'sabotage', it is understandable and seems logical.

For, as he put it, the visit that was «touted as a breaking point in relationships» ended with results lagging from such hopes. Indeed, soon after the visit got under way last Thursday afternoon with Xi arriving in Ahmedabad and Prime Minister Narendra Modi at hand to receive him personally, one could sense something was amiss – as if the conductor had begun the balmy afternoon on the

banks of the ancient Sabarmati river in the western state of Gujarat under the mistaken impression that he was leading a symphony orchestra from Delhi, whereas, in reality a rock band was thrust upon him.

Was the seasoned conductor complacent and was taken by surprise and left with no option but to put a brave face? Or, did he estimate he could give a solo orchestra concert? We do not know, because the conductor is taciturn by nature and seldom discusses music in public.

The crux of the matter is that the Indian media, especially the electronic media, showed up Prime Minister Narendra Modi as out of touch with the gathering storms on the India-China border in the Ladakh sector when he spread out an extraordinary welcome for Xi in his home state on a day that also happened to be his birthday. The media leaks made it out that Modi plainly underestimated the meaning of the India-China military standoff.

The media leaks further claimed that Modi was advised from Delhi late in the evening on Thursday to do a course correction. At any rate, he rounded off that wonderful evening with Xi on a bitter note by making a demarche with the latter about the alleged Chinese «incursions» on Indian territory and seeking his intervention to send the intruders back. The leaks slyly implied that Modi wasn't au fait with the sophisticated world of international diplomacy and needed to be restrained. Alongside, a blistering media campaign has also followed where India's well-known Sinophobists had a field day.

Amidst all this, how the standoff on the India-China border came about still remains in mystery. The Indian versions are patently one-sided and the Chinese habitually refrain from discussing in public what really might have happened.

The Sinophobists in Delhi have come up with the thesis that the Chinese have a habit of creating tensions on the border whenever a high-level visit takes place. Some of them have interpreted that the PLA units in Tibet have acted as 'rogue elements' to spoil the atmosphere of Xi's visit, while some others insist that Xi had foreknowledge of what was afoot on the border and pretended otherwise.

Nothing, however, remains a secret in Delhi for long and in informal conversations, it comes through that the standoff might as well have been the culmination of some untimely moves that the Indian side made about a week or so before Xi's visit began. Whether these were moves that were made at the local level or whether they had the prior approval from the higher-ups in the chain of command, and, even more important, whether there was any degree of political clearance from Delhi – all these remain in the realm of speculation.

However, the net result has been that Modi's manifestly keen initiative to fundamentally transform the India-China discourse has been visibly stalled – at least, temporarily. The focus is exclusively on resolving the standoff at the border.

Evidently, Modi had an ambitious plan as he choreographed Xi's visit, given the elaborate preparations that went into it. Just days before Xi arrived in India, Modi deputed his National Security Advisor to visit Beijing as special envoy; the Commerce Minister visited Beijing twice.

Modi's agenda was highly focused – one, attracting massive Chinese investments into India's manufacturing sector and infrastructure development with a view to kick-start his so-called 'development agenda' aimed at large-scale job creation for India's burgeoning population of unemployed youth; two, exploring how to carry forward the signals from the Chinese side indicative of a keenness to reach a border settlement; and, three, elevating the relationship to a regional and global partnership on the basis of shared interests and common concerns as emerging powers in the world order.

Modi has repeatedly said that in the foreign-policy sphere, his priority lies in economic diplomacy. He is intensely conscious of the fact that his mandate in the recent parliamentary elections emanates out of the pledges he made with regard to steering India's development and good governance. As anywhere, Indian public opinion is fickle-minded and Modi knows it.

What draws him to China, a country that he visited four times in the recent years, is primarily the phenomenal success China has had in bringing hundreds of millions of people above the poverty level in such a short span of time –something that has never happened in human history. Modi is passionate about repeating the Chinese miracle in India – 'If China can do it, why not India too?'

Furthermore, Modi's emphasis is on infrastructure development and building up India's manufacturing industry. Clearly, these are sectors of economy that hold the potential for large-scale job creation. Unlike the Western industrial countries, China has investible surplus and has vast experience in undertaking the kind of projects that India needs. On the other hand, India is a big market and the potentials are enormous for the Chinese companies.

During Xi's visit, despite the hullabaloo about the standoff at the border, the outcome was substantial on the economic side. The Chinese have committed \$30 billion, including some business deals signed by Chinese companies to import products worth \$3.6 billion, the setting up of two industrial parks and in developing a fast train corridor and a new strategic road. This signifies a whopping increase of fifty times over the level of all Chinese investments in India so far.

The railway system in India has been identified as a major area of cooperation with China assisting in introducing faster train on the line connecting the southern cities of Chennai and Mysore via Bangalore; China providing training for Indian railway officials; and China assisting in the redevelopment of existing railway stations and the establishment of a railway university in India. The two countries have agreed to consider cooperating on a prestigious High Speed Rail project. The Bank of China has been granted permission by the Indian authorities to open a branch in Mumbai. Several Indian and Chinese banks have signed agreements.

Significantly, the two countries have agreed on kick-starting bilateral cooperation in civil nuclear energy and have agreed to cooperate at the level of space agencies. To be sure, nuclear and space cooperation are the hallmarks of an altogether qualitatively new level of developmental partnership. The joint statement issued after Xi's visit says that «as two large developing and emerging economies, their developmental goals are interlinked... The leaders agreed to make this developmental partnership a core component of the [India-China] Strategic and Cooperative

Partnership for Peace and Prosperity. This developmental partnership is conducive not only to the common interests of both sides, but also to stability and prosperity of the region and the world.»

No doubt, the formulation underscores the progress of the overall India-China relations in the recent years from a strategic perspective.

Has anything like this in substantive terms and tangible benefit to India in economic areas happened ever before during a high level visit from China? The answer is a vehement 'No'. In fact, India's record is pretty shoddy even with partners such as the United States.

So, how come an impression gained ground that Modi lost all that he had wanted to fetch out of Xi's visit and that his objectives have been derailed? This needs some explanation.