

## A 'Strategic' Anniversary

Magicians never tell the truth. So do state actors in diplomacy. Indian President Pratibha Devisingh Patil and her Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao exchanged congratulatory messages on April 1, 2010, to mark the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between two Asian neighbours. For all practical purposes it was a low-key affair—60th anniversary—as its impact was not felt beyond New Delhi and Beijing enclaves otherwise reserved for VIPs only. While nostalgically recalling the past bilateral bonds dating back to ancient times Hu Jintao stressed the urgency to develop a longterm and stable strategic cooperative partnership to face global challenges in a changed international context in which both India and China, being the fastest growing players in world economy, have extensive shared interests. Ms Patil too in her communication echoed the same spirit while hoping, not against hope, to look forward to continue working closely with China in taking bilateral relations to new heights.

But Chinese premier Wen Jiabao was a bit philosophical as he tried to glorify the relationship issue by depicting the Himalayan reality as two countries are linked by mountains and waters and enjoy cultural commonalities and a traditional friendship of over two thousand years. But this age-old traditional friendship vanished overnight in 1962 as India described China as an aggressor while China lost no time to condemn India in harsh language as expansionist and hegemonic. Jiabao, despite bitter past, was forthright to outline broad prospects of development both India and China are facing in the new era. For Prime Minister Manmohan Singh it was no more than an occasion to reiterate what India has been reiterating for long. He too had his share of scholastic touch in his message as he duelled over ancient civilisations having long tradition of learning from and enriching each other's cultures. However, he ended the note regarding the future of India-China relations with optimism, a nice diplomatic exercise. True, only future will tell whether these two Asian neighbours can live in permanent peace or in a situation of 'no war no peace' as it is now, notwithstanding euphoria over progress in diplomacy.

Foreign ministers too on both sides had their diplomatic fine-tuning on the occasion almost in identical fashion as they saw nothing wrong in snail's pace of development in bilateral ties. For one thing, Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi was candid enough to remind the world that India was one of the few countries to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China and advocated steadfastly to have its rightful place in the UN when China had to face western blockade.

Perhaps it was left to Chinese ambassador to India Mr Zhang Yan to elaborate some uncomfortable aspects of India-China relationship that leaders of both countries avoided in their customary greetings. In his speech at the seminar 'India and China : Public Diplomacy, Building Understanding' co-hosted by the Indian Council of World Affairs and the Institute of Chinese Studies, to mark the occasion, Mr Zhang Yan was honest enough to highlight the pressing necessity to enhance the mutual trust which is vital to a sound and stable relationship.

Without trust there can be no lasting cooperation. Mr Yan, however, focused on an area which most leaders from two countries didn't touch, ostensibly to bypass public sensitivity. He urged two countries to provide correct guidance to the public opinions and shun war of words. The hard reality is that people in two countries have no option but to view bilateral relationship, rather its development, through official prisms. As a result public opinions on both sides of the himalyan divide, remain at a stage where it was four decades ago.

Strangely, the role of India-China friendship forums has been minimal over the years to promote people to people relationship without which the hostile atmosphere that was created after the 1962 border war, cannot be mitigated. Indians and Chinese have not yet broken the mental barrier and begun to trust one another since then. Mistrust is all pervasive.

Mere diplomatic jargons cannot make mutual trust develop to the satisfaction of ordinary people. Despite being neighbour and sharing rich civilisations for more than 2000 years Indian and Chinese know and understand very little of each other.

True, trade between two countries is improving in recent years, albeit it is heavily tilted towards China in terms of deficit balance. No doubt they enjoy their new found major power status in BRICs, BASIC, G-20 and other forums and issues like the global financial crisis. But ultimately what matters is disputed border. In other hands, it is real estate controversy that literally stands in the way of better relationship. It is finally the Tibet card that both sides weigh. The Chinese, officially and unofficially are far more concerned about India's motive in its Tibet policy. What is encouraging is that pending a final resolution to the border dispute, they look unwilling to allow the differences to affect their cooperation.

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