

Manmohan's China visit defies strategic logic¹

Why is Prime Minister Manmohan Singh heading towards China?

I am unable to answer this question; in fact, there is no economic, diplomatic or strategic logic.

Of course, it is said that he would like 'to prioritize investment and business by easing norms for business and tourist visas' as well as reduce border tensions. But is the timing right?

'Business' was the objective of Premier Li Keqiang when he visited Delhi in May. But when Chinese talk about business, they talk about trading from China to India. Mr. Li charmed everybody; he spoke of the Three Idiots, a film that his daughter 'forced' him to see, the Indian establishment (and media) melted: "The guy is really nice; he loves Indian movies". Further, he chose to eat vegetarian food at his Indian counterpart's banquet. Wow, here is a Chinese leader who is different; he deeply respects our customs; he likes India.

The South China Morning Post then commented that Li's foreign tour (India, Pakistan, Switzerland and Germany) was a success: "On his maiden, eight-day diplomatic trip as premier, Li Keqiang not only engaged in serious bilateral talks but also attempted to show his personable side to boost the image of the Chinese leadership."

At that time one of the main issues between India and China was the trade imbalance. Both countries had fixed an ambitious target of US\$ 100 billion as the trade turnover by 2015.

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After the Li-Singh meeting a Joint Statement was issued: "the two countries agreed to take measures to address the issue of the trade imbalance. These include cooperation on pharmaceutical supervision including registration, stronger links between Chinese enterprises and Indian IT industry, and completion of phytosanitary negotiations on agro-products."

Last financial year, India's exports to China reached only \$ 13.52 billion while its imports were \$ 54.3 billion. A trade deficit of \$ 40.78 billion is not paltry!

The Times of India then reported that the companies represented in Li Keqiang's business delegation 'seem bent on selling instead of buying in the Indian market'.

The question is: has this changed? Let us put the question differently, can a new visit change this?

The Prime Minister is said to be keen on 'increasing the tenure of business visas [for Chinese] to one year from the current six months with multi-entry provision and ensuring home ministry security clearance within 30 days for project visas'.

How inviting more Chinese companies to set up shop in India will help to reduce the trade imbalance is a mystery.

The Times of India commented: "The emphasis is significant as security concerns dog Chinese investments in several sectors like telecom".

The relaxation of the visa policy for Chinese nationals will not solve the security issues, further it could only aggravate the trade imbalance.

It sounds like India is trying to be nice to China which again issued 'stapled' visas to two Arunachali archers on their way to an international competition

to Yunnan; this is called the Gujral doctrine, the nastier you are with me, the nicer I will be with you.

One knows where the infamous 'doctrine' led India in the past.

The current reasoning of the Government is that easier visa rules could only help larger exchanges of delegates attending academic or business meetings and conferences. But reciprocity is not guaranteed. You will say that it is the beauty of the 'doctrine'!

Further, despite warnings from all sides, the Prime Minister is dead bent on signing a Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) during his three-day visit to China, starting from October 22.

Some babus in South Block may have concocted a new Agreement (in what will it be different from the 1993, 1996, 2005 and 2012 agreements nobody knows), which could be shown by the PMO as a justification for the visit.

But will China be more sincere in the implementation of the new agreement than they have been for the previous ones?

Another question, has India done her home work? Probably not. But, the Chinese have done theirs.

The Chinese Defence Minister, General Chang Wanquan has just visited the Xinjiang Military District dealing with the Aksai Chin area and India's border in Ladakh.

According to Xinhua, the Minister "called for a strengthened border and national defense in northwest China's Xinjiang." He spent an entire week on an 'inspection tour' of the region.

Can you imagine Mr. Antony spending a week in Arunachal and visiting the forward posts? One can always argue that it is impossible; he would have to walk for too many days, as India has no roads there.

General Chang took the time to visit military units "to further consolidate border defense and cast a wall of copper and steel in the frontier." What does it mean for India?

Just that China will be ready for any eventuality and the PLA will maintain its pro-active posture in the area.

The Chinese Defence Minister told the military units "to lay a solid basis for Xinjiang's long-term peace and stability by consolidating political power in grassroots governments and stepping up the fight against encroachment, separatist and terrorist activities."

Apart from the border with India, the Xinjiang Military District has to deal with the restive local Uyghurs who are, like the Tibetans, resentful of the 'ethnic' policies imposed by Beijing.

Regarding the border with India, Xinhua reported: "Military units were told to put border and national defense into prominent place and contribute to the consolidation of the defense in China's borders."

Interestingly, General Wang asked the local commanders to take 'initiatives in operations'. Ominous words for India; but nobody seems to be worried on this side of the border.

Xinhua said: "The minister demanded military officers to strengthen strategic thinking, carry forward construction projects as well as take initiatives (in operations)."

One wishes the local Indian commanders would sometimes have the same opportunity to 'take initiatives'.

The Cabinet Committee on Security is said to have discussed the border pact, whose objective is "to prevent face-offs between the troops of the two countries along the over 4,000 km disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC)."

Will it really prevent anything? I can bet that it will not.

In any case a point is certain, the Chinese have done their home work.