

Vajpayee's Historic Trip Strengthens India-China Ties

by Ramtanu Maitra

The historic six-day (June 22-27) visit to China by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee took place at an extremely crucial time. The long-term outcome of the trip will emerge over the weeks and months. What is certain, however, is that both Beijing and New Delhi considered the visit as more than strengthening the bilateral relations, but an opportunity to take measure of the grave world situation in a new and hostile environment.

Prime Minister Vajpayee was accompanied by about 100 Indian businessmen and entrepreneurs, beside External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha, National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra, Ambassador to China Shiv Shankar Menon, and Commerce Minister Arun Jaitley.

Following the signing of a joint declaration with his Chinese counterpart, Wen Jiabao, in Beijing, the Indian Prime Minister declared: "We should focus on the simple truth that there is no objective reason for discord between us, and neither of us is a threat to the other." This statement of Vajpayee, who is the first Indian premier to visit China in a decade, should serve as a warning to those who believe that these two, the world's most-populous nations can be kept separated by planting suspicion of one against the other.

Prime Minister Wen provided direction to the future development of the ties by making some concrete proposals. He said the two countries should extend contacts to enhance trust and dispel suspicion, expand cooperation to raise bilateral trade volume to \$10 billion by 2005, develop cooperation in science, education, culture, and health, and set up cultural centers.

The Strategic Context

Prime Minister Vajpayee was scheduled to visit China later this year; A number of events caused the trip to be moved up. To begin with, the Iraq War: The U.S. invasion of Iraq,

defying the United Nations and the goodwill of billions of people worldwide, came as a shock to both the Indian and Chinese leaders. It became evident to them that the world had changed for the worse. The United States, once considered as the icon of economic development and a motive force behind social stability, has now turned unpredictable, if not downright dangerous.

It is this realization that led Vajpayee to tell reporters, less than 48 hours before his departure for Beijing, that the world around us has changed dramatically during recent years, and that "two of the world's largest and most populous developing countries, India and China, should remain in close touch on global issues of concern to developing countries."

Elaborating on the evolution of Sino-Indian relations, Vajpayee continued: "Our dialogue now addresses not only the various areas in which we can improve bilateral cooperation, but also international issues such as terrorism, security, environment, sustainable development, and multilateral economic regimes."

The second important event that hastened the Indian Prime Minister's visit was the late-April visit to China by India's Defense Minister George Fernandes. A sharp critic of China in earlier days, Fernandes was impressed by what he saw and heard in China and, at the same time, was firm and categorical in expressing his views. His refusal to cut short the trip in light of the SARS epidemic in some parts of China, impressed his hosts.

Perhaps the most important meeting that Fernandes had was with China's leading politician and former President, Jiang Zemin. Jiang, who now heads the Chinese People's Liberation Army, told Fernandes that the people of China and India enjoy long-term friendship, and exchanges and cooperation between the two countries in all fields have shown good momentum in recent years. Jiang underlined the need for



The first visit of an Indian Prime Minister to China in ten years reflects both countries' determination to put aside past grievances, and forge a new era of cooperation, in a changed global strategic environment. Here, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is greeted in Beijing on June 23. Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao is the second from the left.

enhancing Sino-Indian bilateral ties, including military ones, which was in the “fundamental interest” of the two nations, and he fondly recollected his visit to India in 1996.

In his talks, Fernandes went a step further. He proposed to the Chinese leaders the Indian interest to patrol the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal jointly with the Chinese Navy. Following the events in Iraq, and the continuing overwhelming presence of the Americans in the Persian Gulf, it is no surprise that New Delhi and Beijing are uneasy about the way the region has been militarized by outsiders. Although China did not respond to the Indian proposal on the spot, it is a matter of great importance, and it is evident that it involves considering a gamut of items. It is only expected that Fernandes' proposal will be considered with due attention in Beijing. It is also a certainty that further discussion on the subject, long before it finally matures, would take place at the highest level of both countries.

The Russian Factor

In 1998, while visiting India, then-Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov had suggested the development of a Strategic Triangle among Russia, China, and India. The objective, he explained, was to use the scientific and technological capabilities, skilled manpower, and available resources of these three nations to stabilize the region through wide-ranging economic development. This concept of a Strategic Triangle had been advocated by Lyndon LaRouche in a number of *EIR Features* during that period.

Despite the stated intent, the progress in working toward developing such a strategic relationship was slow and hesitant. Some claim that the escalation of NATO's air offensive against Belgrade and China's stiff reaction to the accidental

bombing of its embassy in the Yugoslav capital in May 1999 seem to have brought the triangle concept back to the fore. Again, the events of Sept. 11, 2001 in the United States shifted the world's focus to terrorism. But, it has become evident once more in Beijing, Moscow, and New Delhi, that serious efforts are necessary to put such a triangle into effect.

It is perhaps for this reason that at St. Petersburg, during the city's 300th anniversary celebrations last month, following his meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao, Vajpayee spoke about an “Asian Century”—a reference to the 1988 meeting between senior Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping and visiting Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. On that occasion, the Chinese leader had pointed out that the coming of the real Asia-Pacific Century or Asian Century “can only be declared when China, India, and other neighboring nations become developed.”

Since the St. Petersburg meeting, a new liveliness in the relationship has been observed. In Phnom Penh on June 17, at the meeting of the foreign ministers of ASEAN+3 (the ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, plus China, Japan, and South Korea), Russia, China, and India offered to forge strategic partnerships with the Southeast Asian nations. These three nuclear powers gave “strong signals” that they would sign up to the grouping's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, effectively a non-aggression pact among the ten ASEAN member countries.

Russia, China, and India were the first to offer to sign up to the pact. According to an ASEAN diplomat, quoted by the international media, these three powers were keen to demonstrate to the Southeast Asian nations that “we are benign powers and do not desire your territory.” The move by the three nuclear powers to forge such pacts comes as the United States

is stamping its influence on the region under the guise of the international fight against terrorism, analysts said.

In mid-June, a week before Vajpayee left for Beijing, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov was in Delhi on his way to Phnom Penh. Reports indicate that the triangular interaction was at the core of his agenda, during his talks in Delhi.

Close views shared by Russia, India, and China on international issues provide a basis for continuing trilateral dialogue among them and for upgrading its level, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov said, ahead of Ivanov's trip to South Asia.

Subsequently, on June 22, the very day that the Indian Prime Minister arrived in Beijing, China's Prime Minister Wen Jiabao invited India to join China and Russia in holding regular trilateral talks on issues of great importance, such as Iraq.

Important Bilateral Agreements

On June 22, India and China signed their first-ever joint declaration, setting out "goals and guiding principles" to promote their bilateral talks, with the leaders of China proposing a "phasing out" of Sino-Indian differences on their nearly 40-year-old border dispute. The subject was endorsed during the Vajpayee-Wen meeting later.

A Memorandum of Understanding expanding bilateral border trade was also signed by Indian External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha and Chinese Commerce Minister Lu Fuyan, in the presence of the two prime ministers.

On June 24, India and China decided to further step up bilateral trade and increase cooperation to safeguard the interests of developing nations at the World Trade Organization (WTO). These decisions were taken during a meeting in Beijing between Minister of Commerce Arun Jaitley and his Chinese counterpart, Lu Fuyan, official sources said.

The two sides also decided to hold the next round of the Joint Economic Group meeting sometime in November-December this year.

China is a new entrant to the WTO and, like India, is concerned about some of the measures the WTO has imposed on the developing nations. Following his meeting with Lu Fuyan, Jaitley pointed out to the Press Trust of India that India and China have many commonalities and their cooperation is vital to safeguard the interests of the developing countries. His discussion with Lu had centered on Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs), in the area of public health care, as well as agricultural negotiations and investment-related issues. Jaitley, a lawyer who is considered an expert on WTO issues, said, "We have decided to explore how to cooperate with China at the WTO," adding that the two countries have agreed to inform their ambassadors to the WTO in Geneva, so that they could have consultations and adopt a common stand on major issues affecting the developing nations, ahead of a major WTO session in September in Cancún, Mexico.