

Quietly but steadily, ties warm between India and China

by Mary Burdman

India and China are expected to resume talks about their 4,000 kilometer joint border soon, for the first time since India's nuclear tests last May, when relations were strained on both sides. Over recent months, and especially since the beginning of this year, relations between Asia's giants have been warming, slowly but steadily.

The eleventh round of talks of the Joint Working Group on Sino-Indian Borders will be held at an appropriate time after both sides reach an agreement, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue said in Beijing on Jan. 28, Xinhua reported. Zhang said that Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh has been expressing the wish to make further efforts to improve relations with China, and China welcomes this. "China hopes that India will continue to make substantive efforts to promote the bilateral ties to the normal track of development," Zhang said. "This accords with the fundamental interests and the common wish of the people of both countries. It is also beneficial to regional peace and stability."

The dates of the Joint Working Group meetings will likely be decided upon during the visit of Indian Joint Secretary for China T.C.A. Rangachary, beginning on Feb. 25.

There is certainly room for improving relations between the world's two most populous nations. It is still not possible, for example, to fly directly between the two capitals, and direct land transport is also lacking: The border remains militarized, although tranquil, since the 1962 border war, and its spectacular terrain presents an enormous challenge, in any case.

The most contentious issues between India and China—including the border dispute, the nuclear weapons question, and Tibetan refugees in India—are sensitive and will likely not be solved overnight. However, it would seem clear that both nation's leaders understand, that these issues do not interfere with either's fundamental interests, and can, with time and patience, be resolved bilaterally.

On the nuclear question, for example, the Chinese side might indeed recall its own celebration, when it exploded its first atomic bomb in October 1964, after a massive national mobilization for this achievement. And, whatever might have been the reason for the formulations in the letter sent by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to President Bill Clinton, pointing to (but never naming) China as the security

"threat" prompting India's May tests, this view was never stated publicly by the Indian side, and was confined to a private letter between two heads of government. What was unconscionable, was that this letter was leaked to the U.S. press from Washington.

The strategic Asian triangle

Given the much more fundamental interests these two nations share, especially to protect their national economic security in the face of the world financial crisis, their improved relations should certainly be achievable. What will play an important role in this process, is both nations' strong bilateral relations with Russia.

Both India and China had responded coolly to the proposal made by Russian Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov for a "strategic triangle" among India, Russia, and China, when he visited New Delhi in late December. India's Prime Minister did not endorse Primakov's proposal, although their joint communiqué stated that bilateral accords between India and Russia were of paramount importance. China asserted that it "pursues an independent policy of peace," in reaction to Primakov's statement.

However, at an international conference convened by the National Security Advisory Board recently in New Delhi, Indian leaders discussed the view that developing a framework for collective cooperation among the three Asian powers, India, China, and Russia, could lead to greater stability, including at the global level, the Indian newspaper *The Hindu* reported.

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said at the conference, "It is time to consider a broader Asian framework for peace and security for all, and the biggest challenge lies in giving shape to such a cooperative framework." Former Foreign Secretary M.K. Rasgotra stated that it was the terms used, rather than the thinking behind Primakov's proposal, that created the difficulties. Rasgotra said that he preferred "collective cooperation" to "strategic cooperation," which might imply too risky a change in the world order.

K. Subrahmanyam of the National Security Advisory Board also noted that the United States could not be excluded from such a strategic framework, because it has a big military presence in Asia. Better communication among Asian nations

is to be desired, Subrahmanyam said, but excluding the United States, which has good bilateral relations with Russia, China, Japan, and India, would be counter-productive.

Leaders support good ties

Leaders at the highest level on both sides are working to improve relations as rapidly as possible. On Jan. 29, the official Chinese *People's Daily* gave front-page coverage to the reception given by India's President, K.R. Narayanan, to a Chinese delegation led by former Chinese ambassador to India Cheng Ruisheng two days before. Narayanan was himself India's ambassador to China during 1976-78, when the two countries restored full ambassador-level ties 14 years after the border war.

The meeting had not been publicized in India, but the Indian side was gratified by the Chinese reaction. *People's Daily* quoted President Narayanan saying that India and China "should maintain friendly relations and dialogue, which is very important to the development of their relationship." He said that "China is not a threat to India and India is not a threat to China," and the two nations have a tradition of long-term friendly communications. The Indian President said that a flourishing and strong China is a great support to India and other developing countries, and is extremely important to world peace. The current Chinese ambassador to India, Zhou Gang, was also present.

Narayanan also said that he hoped the two countries would celebrate the 50th anniversary of establishing diplomatic ties. India was among the first nations in the world to recognize the People's Republic.

Indian observers noted that the purpose of the delegation led by former ambassador Cheng, and other recent such exchanges, is to establish a "Track Two" process of discussion between the two nations concerning all manner of problems and issues, and to contribute to their solution.

The day before this reception, India celebrated its national Republic Day, and China's leaders sent warm messages to their Indian counterparts. In his message to K.R. Narayanan, Chinese President Jiang Zemin said: "As the two most populous developing countries in the world with long histories and ancient civilizations, China and India should treat each other with sincerity, strengthen the understanding and cooperation between the two countries, and seek common development. These are the wishes shared by our two peoples and are in conformity with the fundamental interests of our two countries. I am ready to work with you to promote the healthy and smooth development of the Sino-Indian relations so as to benefit our two peoples."

Also very positive was the message from Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji to his Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee. It said:

"As the initiators of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, China and India have enjoyed long-term friendly exchanges in history. Harmonious coexistence and common de-

velopment are the shared wishes of our two peoples. The Chinese government has always worked to establish and develop good neighborly, mutually beneficial, and cooperative relations with India on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. I am deeply convinced that as long as China and India strictly follow these principles in practice, a cooperative and constructive partnership into the 21st century between the two countries will be realized."

Cooperative security

Most interesting were the comments of Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes, who gave the keynote address at a two-day seminar on Asian security, sponsored by the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) on Jan. 26. Fernandes had repeatedly made provocative statements about the "China threat" to India since he took office when the current Bharatiya Janata Party-led government came to power in March—although he himself attacked the press last August, for making "deliberate mischief" by distorting his comment calling China "potential threat number one," into "enemy number one."

In his address, Fernandes said: "To ensure stability and to reduce the risk of accident and miscalculation, it is vital that the nuclear doctrine of various countries is harmonized with the concept of cooperative security, and this would necessitate commitment to no-first-use of nuclear weapons, and nuclear postures in consonance with them." He noted that China and India had already declared that they would not be the first to use nuclear weapons, *The Hindu* reported.

The prevailing fundamental uncertainty in the strategic, economic, and military dimensions underscores the need for a cooperative security arrangement in Asia, Fernandes said. Asia is undergoing a tumultuous socio-economic transformation. The economic crisis in Asia has triggered unanticipated challenges in the region, including possible refugee outflows. Regional powers have a role to play in channelling these social forces toward peace, security, and prosperity, he said.

Conflict resolution in Asia could be based on the five principles of peaceful co-existence and the UN Charter. "The challenge of our times lies in our ability to transform these principles into practical policy of cooperative peace and security," Fernandes said.

He expressed his regret at the lack of Chinese participants at this conference. "In particular we miss the presence of experts from our great neighbor China, who were invited, with whom dialogue is even more important," he said. He stated that he had received an informal invitation to China from former Chinese ambassador Cheng Ruisheng, and said that he would like to visit.

Fernandes said that perceptions had changed after the nuclear tests in May, and that the U.S and Chinese heads of government could negotiate a treaty to remove missiles targeting each other, and India could engage China in a dialogue, keeping in mind their mutual experiences.