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The 17th round of India-China border talks (Feb. 10-11) in New Delhi passed off without any “free and frank” exchanges, that is, there was no disagreement. The first meeting was at the joint secretary level with military experts on both sides.

The situation on the border was reviewed and apparently was found satisfactory. The meeting it appears, was constructed by both sides to ensure no negative vibration emerged.

The main meeting, the 17th round of talks between the Special Representatives (SRs) of the two sides was much wider in scale because matters outside the border issue were discussed. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) statement said the talks were held in a “**candid, friendly and constructive atmosphere**”. Mr. Shivshankar Menon, the Indian SR and Mr. Yang Jiechi, the Chinese SR are veterans in the foreign policy game and India-China relations. On the Chinese side they know the stakes they are playing with. They have in their pocket “something to give” on the border issue if need be. But no one can say for sure what that is.

It must be kept in mind that the old Chinese position “if India makes concessions in the east” has not become irrelevant. In China’s foreign policy dealings, nothing once stated becomes irrelevant unless it is stated so officially.

The three-step process agreed to by both sides to resolve the boundary question was reiterated. The process has arrived at step-2 to reach a framework for a resolution of this question. This will be based on the Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the settlement of the India-China Boundary Question. The SRs discussed possible additional Confidence Building Measures (CBM).

Other issues discussed, according to the MEA release included areas of mutual interest including cooperation in the East Asia Summit process as well as developments in West Asia and Afghanistan. Pakistan should have figured in the discussions, but it appears that the Chinese do not want it to be seriously included in the “India-China strategic partnership and co-operation”. It is too sensitive a subject.

China made its general position on the border clear when reacting to Indian President Pranab Mukherjee’s visit to Arunachal Pradesh in November last year. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang urged (*Xinhua*, Nov.30 2013) India not to indulge in acts that complicate the boundary issue and work with China to create conditions for talks and preserve peace and tranquility on the border.

The *Xinhua* commentary went on to say “The so-called Arunachal Pradesh was established largely on three areas of China’s Tibet-Monyul, Loyul and Lower Tsayul currently under Indian illegal occupation. These three areas, located between the illegal MacMahon Line and the traditional customary boundary between China and India, have always been Chinese territory.”

The commentary added that in February 1987, Indian authorities declared the founding of the so-called Arunachal Pradesh.

Before further meetings on the border issue the Chinese side drew the lines. That is, the basic Chinese position that the border lay along the northern banks of the river Brahmaputra; India set up Arunachal Pradesh illegally; and if India did not work with China and on its directions, China could revert to a hard-line position. This is China’s position on the eastern sector of the India-China border.

It is, therefore, not surprising that even Chinese incursion into India’s Depsang area in the western sector last year was generally kept outside the main agenda.

The focus is now testing out the Border Defense cooperation agreement signed during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s visit to China last October.

With national elections in India barely two months away and opinion surveys emphatically suggesting that UPA government led by the Congress has little or no hope to return to power for the third time in a row, it was only right for Prime Minister Singh and National Security Advisor (NSA) Menon to take no new initiatives on the border and analyze the efficacy of Border Defence Agreement signed between the two countries last October.

The new hierarchy in New Delhi will be well advised to consider relations with China on a much bigger canvas. While getting played by China on the boundary question, New Delhi must not lose sight of other strategic interests regionally and globally.

The Chinese leadership including the People's Liberation Army (PLA) are full of hubris as the next global super power. On the India-China border, the Chinese attained confidence of military superiority, and would continue to play mind games. The Border Defence Agreement was proposed by China, and India agreed to it only after some critical amendments. China went through with it but was not satisfied. The agreement could not put the Indian forces and border development in a strait jacket. It is going to come up with more CBMs on the border in due course. This is something Indian experts must look out for.

There was some speculation that because of support to Uighur separatists from extremist elements in Pakistan, China-Pakistan relations was becoming weaker. True, the Chinese were furious with Pakistan especially during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. But weak relationship? Emphatically no. Beijing is determined to crush the Uighur separatists as evidenced by the hard crackdown in Xinjiang.

Pakistan is of immense importance to China. It concerns Chinese interests in the Gulf and the Middle East with Pakistan being a Muslim nation. Afghanistan now looms on the horizon, but it is a tricky issue. Certainly, China is discussing Afghanistan with India but all its cards on the burning issue remain hidden.

China's support to Pakistan on Pakistan's issues with India continues to be as strong as ever. On Kashmir, there has been no change in position though statements are deliberately muted. It has done nothing and said nothing on Pakistan sponsored and Pakistani based terrorism against India. Yet it high profiles the so-called "three evils" terrorism, separatism and religious extremism. China's cooperation against terrorism and extremism across the world remains a hollow trumpet till date.

A new worrisome development has taken place. The BBC reported recently that Pakistan had manufactured nuclear weapons exclusively for Saudi Arabia. There were denials but not convincing enough. It is well known that China had supplied Saudi Arabia CSS-2 nuclear capable missiles in the 1980s. Obviously, these were meant for regional use. But nuclear capable missiles without nuclear warheads is an incongruous military doctrine. China has been modernizing Pakistan's nuclear weapons capability and fissile material production facilities. The three countries tie up very nicely as the Saudis remain the mainstay not only of Pakistan's economy but of its military modernization. After all Pakistan, a Sunni majority country like Saudi Arabia, owns the "Islamic bomb"!

The above scenario is not an idle thought. The world is aware of the Pakistani nuclear scientist Dr. A. Q. Khan's nuclear trade network leading to major proliferation. China was a self-effasive but root player in this. The west let both China and Pakistan off lightly for their own geostrategic reasons.

After Saudi Arabia and the US differed on the approach to the Syrian crisis the Saudis are moving back to engage China and Pakistan with more resolve. The Saudi crown prince was in Pakistan recently and his agenda included defence cooperation.

On the other end of the Indian Ocean is the issue of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. China is increasingly trying to force control of the international maritime route through which around 50 percent of global trade passes. Using vague historical evidence mainly

manipulated, China claims sovereignty of the Spratly group of Islands in the South China Sea. It is using the naval flag march here to intimidate other claimants. India is likely to get into conflict with China on its oil exploration with Vietnam in Vietnam's waters claimed by China.

There are a whole range of issues that are likely to come up in India-China interface in the next five years. The new dispensation in New Delhi will have to deal with them.

How these issues are dealt with is another question. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made non-conflict and warm relations with China and Pakistan his top priorities. He failed because such a relationship does not exist in the minds of either of these two countries. In the course of his policies, Dr. Singh bent over too much.

The foregoing are only illustrative examples of issues that India will come to face. It is not suggested that India should adopt aggressive postures against China. But at the same time, India should get out of the habit of rolling over to achieve what is not achievable. Firmness on issues of national and strategic importance is imperative. Prime Minister Singh did this in the case of the nuclear deal with the US at the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) despite China's opposition till the last moment. Unfortunately, the Chinese official criticism on President Pranab Mukherjee's visit to Arunachal Pradesh did not elicit a suitable demarche from India.

This is where the problem lies.

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