

Remarkable Growth In China-India Relations

by Mary Burdman

Since the groundbreaking visit of Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes to China at the end of April, relations between the two giant nations of Asia have improved steadily. The long-planned visit of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to China—the first by an Indian Prime Minister since P.V. Narasimha Rao's in 1993—was confirmed when Vajpayee met Chinese President Hu Jintao in St. Petersburg, Russia, amidst the world leaders' meetings there on May 31. There are many indications that this visit will have unprecedented results, for both sides, and for international security and economic affairs.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry announced on June 12 that Vajpayee will visit China from June 22-27, one day more than previously discussed in the Indian media. Ministry spokesman Kong Quan said that Vajpayee is visiting at the invitation of his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao, for in-depth discussions on bilateral relations and on regional and international issues. Vajpayee himself has not been in China since 1979, when he was External Affairs Minister. He will visit Beijing and Shanghai, China's largest industrial city and the center of its commercial ties to India. There, he will meet with former Chinese President Jiang Zemin, who remains the powerful chairman of the Central Military Commission.

'An Asian Century'

Vajpayee's visit will also commemorate over 2,000 years of Chinese-Indian cultural relations. He will visit the ancient city of Luoyang in Henan province, which is the site of one of the oldest Buddhist temples in China. This was built after a delegation from China made the vast overland journey "to the west"—to India—to learn about Buddhism. Not only did many Chinese monks make this remarkable trip and bring Buddhist literature and art back to China, but their stories were turned into one of the most famous works of Chinese literature, the *Journey to the West*.

In his talks with Hu Jintao in St. Petersburg, Vajpayee said that dialogue and increasing cooperation between China and India could herald "an Asian century." Hu Jintao responded that Beijing considers developing friendship and cooperation with India a matter of greatest importance. Hu emphasized that India and China—which together have more than one-third of the world's population—must develop their economies. If they cooperate in this endeavor, this could influence the global agenda. In St. Petersburg, Indian Foreign

Secretary Kanwal Sibal said this “was a good, friendly meeting where all the right things were said. Both countries want to deepen and diversify their relationship and synergize their respective economic potential and growth.”

The two leaders did not discuss Pakistan, Sibal said. In May, just before Indian External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha went to Moscow, his China’s Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing told him by telephone, that China “supports and welcomes” the India-Pakistan rapprochement. The unresolved border demarcation issue was not discussed, but both sides called for consultations and negotiations to seek a fair and equitable solution. The “central message” of the meeting, Sibal said, was that India and China are big nations, which should cooperate, and that their close views on international issues are beneficial for regional peace and security.

One indication of such cooperation was Beijing’s announcement on June 1 that senior officials will be holding their first-ever joint policy planning consultations to expand coordination of their approach to such critical situations as Iraq and the Korean Peninsula. At an Asian security conference in Singapore on June 1, Fernandes said that India “would like to build a very close relationship [with China], but it will take time.” Measures for both sides to reassure each other on their security interests in Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, and Central Asia, were developed during Fernandes’ visit to China. Back home on May 13, Fernandes, who was the first to say that Vajpayee would go to China so soon as June, praised the “peace, tranquility, and even bonhomie” between Chinese and Indian troops on their border.

He also emphasized improving trade relations. Bilateral trade grew by almost 78%, to \$1.66 billion, in the first three months of 2003. In 2002 as a whole, trade was worth \$4.92 billion, up from \$3 billion. In January 2002, then-Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji had called for joint trade to reach \$10 billion. India’s main exports to China are iron and steel, up by 2,279% over a year ago. The steel is being used in China’s huge infrastructure construction work.

An editorial June 3 in the leading Indian daily *The Hindu*, called the Vajpayee-Hu meeting “perhaps the most significant” of the Indian Prime Minister’s many meetings in St. Petersburg. Of greatest importance, *The Hindu* wrote, “The two countries have the opportunity to give economics greater weight in their bilateral relations and move the peace and tranquility on the long borders to trade and commerce across them. . . . [T]he two countries can combine forces to wield greater economic clout on the global arena.” Indeed, the “time for combined effort has arrived. Never in the past half a century has the international community felt the absence of alternative leadership more acutely,” after the Iraq War has shown the failure of so many countries to “stop an act of aggression against a sovereign nation. As the continent of Europe responds through greater political and economic unity, Asia has its task cut out. India and China must provide the right combined leadership.”

Even more forthcoming was the open letter written by Hua Junduo, Ambassador of China to New Delhi, which was widely published in the Indian media on June 11. As Fernandes met Prime Minister Wen Jiabao in Beijing, Wen struck what is becoming a “theme”: For these two ancient civilizations, “during the past 2,200 years, about 99.9% of the time we have devoted to friendly cooperation between our two countries.”

Hua Junduo’s letter noted that these friendly relations have had “three peak periods.” The first was “when Buddhism bound China and India together in the earliest stage of the historic exchanges,” Hua wrote. The second was the “mutual sympathy and support in their respective struggles for national independence and liberation in modern times.” Most recent was the 1950s when the two “newly-emerging” Asian nations created their “good-neighborly relationship” based on the “Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence they jointly initiated for the world after the Second World War.”

These heights “have laid a lasting and solid foundation for the Sino-Indian relationship,” Hua wrote. It is the Chinese world view that “it is the inevitable tendency that such a great and traditional relationship shall last and flourish.” In the last ten years, there have been “sea changes” in the world situation, while Chinese-Indian relations have moved steadily ahead. Hua said this was based on two understandings: One, that the two sides “should in no way allow their historic baggage to stand in the way of the all-round development of relations between them. The other is that neither country would see the other as a threat.”

But an important task remains, Hua wrote. The two countries must overcome the “inadequacy in mutual understanding.” Few Chinese know of India’s many economic and scientific successes; many Indians suspect China as a “threat.” In reality, the nations “share enormous interests in maintaining regional and global stability, safeguarding national independence and developing their economy.”

Relation Began with Rajiv Gandhi

The ground for this mutual relationship, was laid 15 years ago, during the visit of the late Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1988. Gandhi had opposed many “nay-sayers” when he broke out of the quagmire following the 1962 hostilities, and went to China, especially on the well-based hope that senior leader Deng Xiaoping would greet him warmly. As Ambassador Hua wrote, “Mr. Deng Xiaoping noted to the visiting Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1988, ‘It makes no sense to talk about the Asian Century unless both China and India become developed. The coming of the real Asia-Pacific Century or Asian Century can only be declared when China, India and other neighboring nations become developed.’ ”

Prime Minister Vajpayee called for an “Asian century” in St. Petersburg, Hua concluded. “History will eventually prove that China and India are partners, not rivals.”