



HIGH-LEVEL VISITS FROM CHINA: NEW DIPLOMATIC STRATEGY

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By the end of this year India would have played host to two of China's senior most leaders. The first visitor, Zhou Yongkang, arrived on a 3-day (Oct 31-Nov 2, 2010) visit in early November. His ranking at the bottom of the list of the 9-member Politburo Standing Committee, the Chinese Communist Party's all-powerful and apex body, belies his true importance and influence as China's Security Czar. In that capacity he oversees the country's entire Party, government and military security apparatus. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao is the other dignitary scheduled to arrive on December 16. Both these leaders are due to demit office on retirement at the next Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress scheduled to held around October 2012. The visits occur at an important juncture in India-China relations and when the geopolitical situation in Asia and the Asia-Pacific is in a state of flux.

Both the leaders are also traveling to India at a time when there is a visible assertiveness in China's policies, which is reflective of the newfound confidence among the Chinese leadership and people.

This has been generated largely by China's consistent double-digit economic growth over three decades and ensuing international adulation. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's confidence particularly, stems from its view that: (i) the Party's successful policies have raised the nation to its present level of military strength and economic prosperity; (ii) that the country is much wealthier as visible in its high share of international trade, huge US\$ 2.4 trillion foreign currency reserves etc. and that the majority of the people are vastly better off than before as evidenced by their approximately US\$

4,000 annual per capita income; (iii) that the Party has generally maintained stability and law and order in society, including to a fair extent in the restive Autonomous Regions of Xinjiang and Xizang (Tibet); and (iv) that the Party's pre-eminent position currently remains unassailable.

Chinese analysts have concurrently assessed that, in contrast, the US military is over-stretched consequent to being embroiled in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and that the world's major economies, especially the US, have been considerably weakened

because of the deleterious effects of the international economic crisis. China's leaders, therefore, perceive the current time as opportune for China to make its bid for pre-eminence in the larger Asia-Pacific region.

Zhou Yongkang, in his capacity as China's chief of security has considerable say in matters concerning maintenance of social stability and order. His inputs are particularly important in decisions and policies regarding the national minorities and autonomous regions, especially

concerning the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and Tibetans in Xizang, or the Tibet Autonomous Region. He, in fact, headed the preparatory groups for the two major Work Forums on Tibet and Xinjiang held in the first half of this year. His responsibility for policies relating to China's minority nationalities was not lost on the Tibetan community in India, who staged a protest when he was in Delhi on Nov 1. Significantly, Zhou Yongkang has additionally been entrusted with a major role in formulating China's new Asia policy, which includes India, and is in the last stages of finalization. His visit to India was also in this connection.

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Others involved in formulation of the new Asia policy include Dai Bingguo, China's Special Representative for Talks with India as also separately with Russia and USA. He is understood to be an advocate of a hard line stance on India. Vice President and newly appointed Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Xi Jinping, is another important member of the team. He is Deputy Head of the Party's Leading Group on Foreign Affairs Work. He is also a member of the Party's Leading Group on National Security Work. His proximity to Zhou Yongkang and his background strongly suggest that he would side with Dai Bingguo. Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, also a member of this policy formulation body, is believed to favour a moderate position. He will, however, be outnumbered. China's Commerce Minister, Chen Deming, a Doctorate in Economics and Business Administration, is another member of the Party's Leading Group on Foreign Affairs Work.

The highlight of Zhou Yongkang's visit to India was his address to the Second India-China Conference convened by the Congress Party. The last of the five points that he recommended at this conference incorporated a new formulation. He said 'for controversial issues and disagreements, the two countries should properly handle them on the basis of mutual respect, consultations on equal basis and mutual understanding and mutual accommodation, so as not to let specific issues affect the overall relations'. The formulation expands the scope of discussions to include all controversies and disagreements, including the border, implying that negotiations could be protracted. During his visit he met the Prime Minister, External Affairs Minister, Congress President Ms Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul Gandhi as also leaders of the main opposition party, the BJP and leaders of the three Left parties. Meeting Sonia Gandhi, the Chinese visitor described her as one who knew China well, was a friend and had visited China five times. The border issue, according to the official Chinese news agency Xinhua, was discussed with Rahul Gandhi. Zhou Yongkang briefly visited the Infosys campus in Bangalore on his way back to China.

When the Prime Minister raised the issue of the Chinese government issuing stapled visas to residents of Jammu and Kashmir, however, Zhou Yongkang side-stepped a reply observing that it would be better discussed with Premier Wen Jiabao. Xinhua's domestic service despatch of Nov 2, while reporting this meeting, did mention the Indian Prime Minister's assurance that India regarded the Tibet Autonomous Region as part of China and that India would not let Tibetans in India engage in anti-China activities, but omitted any reference to the Prime Minister raising India's concerns regarding Kashmir or the issue of stapled visas.

Coinciding with Zhou Yongkang's stay in India, the People's Daily on Nov 2 published an article by its editor, Li Hongmei. Commenting on the Indian Prime Minister's visits to Japan, Malaysia and Vietnam, the article described India's 'Look East Policy' as 'Look to Encircle China'. It concluded with the veiled warning that 'India's leadership will not rashly board the ship of Japan without giving a glance at China's expression'.

During his interaction with the Prime Minister, CCP CC Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang predictably mentioned the issue of the Dalai Lama and Tibet. Both are important items on his agenda. When the Prime Minister raised the issue of the Chinese government issuing stapled visas to residents of Jammu and Kashmir, however, Zhou Yongkang side-stepped a reply observing that it would be better discussed with Premier Wen Jiabao. Xinhua's domestic service despatch of Nov 2, while reporting this meeting, did mention the Indian Prime Minister's assurance that India regarded the Tibet Autonomous Region as part of China and that India would not let Tibetans in India engage in anti-China activities, but omitted any reference to the Prime Minister raising India's concerns regarding Kashmir or the issue of stapled visas.

The deft manner in which the Chinese have been handling this question, with senior leaders declining to directly give a response, is pertinent. At the same time, Beijing has reiterated its unyielding official position on the issue of stapled visas to residents of J&K at every opportunity.

A day prior to Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh's meeting with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit in Hanoi on October 27, 2010, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman at the official press briefing on October 26 stated, in reply to a question, that: "China and India are staying in close communication on the issue. Once there's any update, information will be released in due course. China's visa policy toward residents of the India-held Kashmir is consistent and remains unchanged". When the Indian and Chinese leaders met a day later and

the Indian Prime Minister raised the subject, the Chinese Premier replied that it could be taken up when they met in India.

Similarly, just prior to the meeting between the Indian and Chinese Foreign Ministers at the India-Russia-China Tripartite Meeting in Wuhan, China, on Nov 14-15, 2010, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson clarified that the issue of stapled visas to residents of Jammu and Kashmir was official policy. According to the briefing by Indian officials on Nov 15, 2010, during his meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, India's External Affairs Minister SM Krishna for the first time ever drew a parallel between the 'territorial red lines' of both countries. He told China that just as New Delhi had been sensitive to its concerns over the Tibet Autonomous Region and Taiwan, Beijing too should be mindful of Indian sensitivities on Jammu and Kashmir. The statement was intended to underscore the depth of India's concerns over recent Chinese attempts to question the country's sovereignty in Kashmir. Clarifying the context to the press, Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao said the two Ministers reviewed the state of bilateral relations, which Yang Jiechi described as in "very good shape." External Affairs Minister Krishna said there was a need for both sides to be sensitive to each other's core concerns. Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao said "in that context the External Affairs Minister spoke of Jammu and Kashmir and expressed the hope that China would be sensitive to J&K just as we have been to the Tibet Autonomous Region and Taiwan". Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, however, did not deviate from current policy and replied that 'China always believed the problem of Jammu and Kashmir could only be resolved through dialogue and negotiations between India and Pakistan and that there has been no change in its policy'.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's upcoming visit to India on December 16, will be his second, the last being in April 2005. He will combine it with visits to two other countries including Pakistan. Anticipating that the matter of China issuing stapled visas to residents of J&K will be

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raised when he visits India, he will come prepared. But the Chinese are unlikely to grant any meaningful concession. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao could also choose to mainly discuss economic and trade matters and raise the subject of the Dalai Lama and Tibet in a pro forma manner to avoid the discussions becoming contentious and marring the atmosphere of his visit.

This visit by Wen Jiabao takes place before his scheduled retirement in October 2012. It also occurs after a couple of telling incidents. During the

Sichuan earthquake in 2008 when Wen Jiabao was personally leading the national disaster relief operations, the PLA and PAP forces did not render any assistance till instructions were issued by Military Commission Chairman and PRC President Hu Jintao after his premature return from the G-20 Summit. More recently, Wen Jiabao's comments on 'democracy', made in an extensive interview on Oct 3, 2010 with CNN's Farid Zakaria, were blanked out by the official Chinese media. This is most unusual in the case of the third highest ranking leader in China who, in any case, probably referred to 'socialist democracy' and not democracy as understood by Westerners.

The visits by Zhou Yongkang and Wen Jiabao to India take place when bilateral relations are under strain because of China's actions and insensitivity to India's concerns. They coincide with China adopting an assertive posture with India. While at the superficial level border negotiations and official-level contacts between India and China continue, military pressure along the entire 4,057 kms undemarcated India-China border has been constant with no decline in the incidence of intrusions. There has, on the contrary, been a steady increase in pressure on a range of issues. Illustrative are China's: opposition to the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement; ducking receiving the telephone

call from the Prime Minister; attempts to frustrate India's bid for a permanent seat at the UNSC; continuing assistance to Pakistan militarily and for expanding its nuclear capabilities; augmenting of China's military infrastructure in Tibet; re-opening the hitherto settled issue of Sikkim; and enhancing the

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profile of its territorial claim on Arunachal Pradesh, which it refers to as 'southern Tibet'. It initiated a policy of declining visas to residents of Arunachal Pradesh and compelled international institutions not to extend loans for development projects in that state. More recently, it raised the ante in Kashmir by inviting a Hurriyat 'leader' to China through an NGO, designating the entire state as 'disputed' by issuing loose-leaf visas to residents of the state and later declining a visa to the Northern Army Commander on the plea that he commands troops in the 'disputed territory of J&K'.

Another issue with the potential to cause serious discord is the proposed diversion of the Brahmaputra river waters. Work on the Western Route, which directly affects India, began this year and is scheduled for completion in 2050. There is talk of a mega construction at the Great Bend just north of where the Brahmaputra enters India. Though Chinese President Hu Jintao officially denied plans to divert the Brahmaputra while meeting Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Delhi in 2006, and kept silent during the Prime Minister's subsequent visit to China, there is evidence—including satellite photographs—that construction of dams at various points along the river has started. Available reports suggest there are plans for constructing 17 dams along the course of the Yarlung Tsangpo river. Construction of the dam at Zhangmu commenced last year and, according to an announcement by the TAR Governor in March 2009, four dams are planned on the Brahmaputra. Despite India seeking clarification regarding Chinese plans for diverting the waters of the Brahmaputra none has been forthcoming. In fact China steadfastly denied it was constructing any dams till a couple of months ago when, confronted with data, it admitted to building a hydel project at Zhangmu. Beijing, however, described this as a 'run of the river' project similar to that being built by India on the Sutlej river.

Deep seated suspicions in Beijing of US intentions could well influence the India-China relationship. The growing warmth in US-India relations is a source of apprehension for Beijing and has generated numerous critical references in China's authoritative official media and by its military and

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strategic analysts. The large-scale joint US-ROK military exercises, second phase of which commenced on November 28, and escalation of tension on the Korean Peninsula has added to the pressure on China. These concerns were reflected during the tension in US-China relations this July when the US-ROK joint military exercises were staged in the Yellow Sea. A Hong

Kong-based Chinese language paper at that time observed '...the issue of China's territorial disputes with neighbouring countries will ignite the flames of war sooner or later. If a country must be chosen for sacrifice, India will be the first choice...India's long term occupation of southern Tibet (Arunachal Pradesh) is indeed worrying...If armed force is used to resolve border disputes, China must pick a county to target first, and it will definitely pick a big country, which means choosing between Japan and India...'. Numerous other critical references to India were noticed in China's official media in the period between July-August 2010. Similar references earlier to Japan and India had added that China's relationship with both these countries have limits imposed by history. Numerous critical references were again seen during US President Obama's visit to India. These harped that the US was trying to draw India into an alliance and that US, Japan and India were trying to contain China.

The visits to India by Zhou Yongkang and Wen Jiabao sandwich that by US President Obama last month. The visits are part of China's two-tiered diplomatic strategy of overtly portraying normalcy, by exchanging high level official visits with nations where there are strains in the relationship, while simultaneously pushing assertively on issues perceived as affecting sovereignty or territory. Examples are the number of high level visits exchanged with Vietnam recently and Chinese President Hu Jintao's meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan on the sidelines of the APEC Summit in Tokyo, despite strained ties with Japan and the Dalai Lama's presence in Japan at the time. China's relations with both these countries are strained. The objectives of this strategy would be to keep the door open for negotiations, portray China's 'reasonableness', induce a sense of complacency in the other country,

and exert pressure—including military—to extract concessions. The recently concluded important fifth plenum of the seventeenth CCP Central Committee reiterated the objective of 'winning short-duration local wars under hi-tech informatised conditions'.

Indications are that China will continue to exert pressure on India on a range of issues and be unyielding in its stance

on the border. The Chinese authorities will urge the Dalai Lama's representatives to get the Dalai Lama to resile from his declared position on the border issue including Tawang. During Wen Jiabao's forthcoming visit India's leadership should clearly assert India's interests and enumerate the various areas of concern indicating that Kashmir is not the only one.



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