

5 Ways for India to Improve Ties With China

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There is something about the number five in Chinese-Indian relations. Asia's two giants have long defined their relationship in terms of the famous pancha sheela: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual nonaggression, mutual noninterference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence.

Now China's new leaders have enunciated a new pancha sheela, with Chinese President Xi Jinping offering a "five-point proposal" for Chinese-Indian relations. The updated principles would maintain strategic communication and healthy bilateral relations; harness each other's strengths and expand cooperation in infrastructure, investment, and other areas; deepen cultural ties and increase mutual understanding and friendship; expand coordination and collaboration in multilateral affairs to safeguard developing countries' legitimate interests and address global challenges; and accommodate each other's core concerns and reconcile bilateral disagreements amicably.

India would be happy to embrace each of these principles. Only the fifth point is tricky because

it leaves China's "core concerns" undefined. Traditionally, these were Tibet and Taiwan, but Chinese officials have recently referred to their claims on the South China Sea as a "core interest" as well.

This has opened a Pandora's box for China and has facilitated the United States' rediscovery of Asia. India, like many other countries with economic interests in the Pacific, wants freedom of maritime navigation to be assured with no threat of a Chinese veto. Indeed, China must be mindful of India's "core interests" as well, especially because it has grievously damaged at least one such interest by enabling Pakistan to develop nuclear weapons.

China's investment in strategic assets like the Gwadar Port in Pakistan has reinforced India's anxiety. While China cannot be blamed, perhaps not even implicated, in the growing tendency of India's South Asian neighbors to play the "China card," India cannot remain oblivious to this trend.

With that caveat, India should welcome Xi's five principles because they recognize the two countries' new and growing economic relationship and global cooperation. This was a good starting point for Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's conversation with Xi at the BRICS summit in Durban, South Africa last month.

Over the past nine years, Singh has enunciated his own five principles for Chinese-Indian relations. The first principle concerns the border issue, and Singh stated it at his first meeting with then-Prime Minister Wen Jiabao in Vientiane, Laos, in November 2004. Singh told Wen that India was willing to find an accommodation with China on the border question and that any agreement must take into account "ground realities."

Singh's second principle, often erroneously attributed to Wen, who subsequently repeated it on several occasions, is that "the world has enough space for the growth ambitions of both countries." In other words, the rise of China, followed by India — fully two-fifths of the world's population — does not imply a conflict-ridden, zero-sum game.

On the contrary, Singh's third principle is that the rise of China and India could amount to providing a global public good. Addressing the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in January 2008, Singh foresaw the possibility of positive externalities for the world as a whole from the rise of China and India, owing to the new opportunities for development that they could bring, especially to other developing countries.

Singh's fourth principle is that, both because of and despite all of the above, the bilateral relationship will be characterized by elements of both cooperation and competition. While there is space for both countries to rise and while that may benefit the global economy and offer opportunities for other forms of cooperation — for example, on climate change and energy security — the potential for competition for markets, resources and influence should not be ignored.

The fifth principle is a more general norm of national security: A country's policy toward another is defined not just by intentions, but also by capabilities. Intentions can change, while capabilities are more enduring.

Thus, it is not what one country's political leaders say, but what they are capable of doing,

that should guide other countries' policy toward it. Even as Indian leaders accept all of China's assurances, they cannot afford to remain indifferent to China's rising capability to create problems for India.

On the question of intention versus capability, former U.S. President Ronald Reagan had the last word. When asked if he could trust his Soviet counterparts when they promised to reduce their nuclear capabilities, Reagan famously said that he would "trust, but verify," invoking an expression that Russians consider their own. That was precisely Singh's reply when he was asked if he could trust Pakistan's former President Pervez Musharraf, and it should be any Indian leader's response to assurances offered by China's leaders.

There is another concern that ought to engage both leaders: How will developments in the global economy, especially the trans-Atlantic slowdown and the emergence of religious and other extremist politics in Asia affect not only their own countries' rise, but also that of Asia as a whole?

Conflict in Asia, whether in the South China Sea or in western Asia, serves neither side's interests. China and India cannot afford to remain reticent observers while Asia burns around them, mired in sectarianism, terrorism, violence, and instability.

Likewise, it does not serve China's interests to unnerve the countries of Southeast Asia, playing one against another. Nor is a Chinese-Japanese conflict over the East China Sea in the interests of the rest of Asia. Rather, China and Japan should work together to build a new regional architecture for sustained economic growth and security.

China and India have a responsibility to work with other Asian powers, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Japan, Russia and the U.S., to ensure peace, prosperity and stability in the region. Many principles of cooperative engagement can and should be crafted from the difficult challenges that Asia's two giants confront.

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