



The EU, China and India The Promise of Trilateral Engagement

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In the Asian century, the dynamics created by the simultaneous rise of China and India will have important political, economic and security implications for the world. There are both new and old problems between the two countries, ranging from those of a bilateral nature to conflicts of interest that are engendered by larger global ambitions, as well as those caused by differences in political systems and values. While China's 'peaceful rise' is much talked about, its legitimacy as the United States' successor has not hitherto been questioned. India's rising global economic and political profile means, however, that it will become an increasingly serious challenger to China. How can the EU intervene in a positive and creative manner to ensure that a 'new cold war' does not develop between the two Asian giants? While the EU does engage with China and India in multilateral forums that it promotes, such as the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), a more focused and regular trilateral engagement is likely to be more effective over the longer term in influencing and shaping the Sino-Indian relationship.

Issues in Sino-Indian Relations

There are a number of issues in Sino-Indian relations in which the EU can play a positive role. The first order of difference between China and India involves their political systems and values. However, neither the Chinese nor the Indians yet see their relationship in terms of stark civilizational or ideological differences, even if these might be significant to their respective worldviews. In this context, the 'EU approach' distinguishes itself clearly from the American approach in being less willing to deal in 'evil empire', 'clash of civilizations' or 'axis of evil' hypotheses. This European approach is also more adept at bridging differences and building consensus, given the EU's own experiences with enlarging its membership and deepening its institutions. Despite various limitations, this comparatively sober approach is certainly an advantage in dealing with the Sino-Indian relationship.

Second, moving to specific bilateral issues, Sino-Indian relations continue to be bedevilled by the unresolved boundary dispute and the attendant complications involving Tibet. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's statement some years ago about making borders 'irrelevant' between India and Pakistan was no doubt inspired as much by the modern EU experience as it was by the history of undivided India. There is similar inspiration to be had with respect to the Sino-Indian boundary dispute. While Tibet was a 'buffer' between India and China during the colonial era, it was a meeting place for the two civilizations for far longer. Borders can be just as 'irrelevant' in this instance, too.

However, the difference between the Indo-Pakistani and Sino-Indian situations is that in the former case the levels of interaction at the government-to-government and people-to-people levels have been far higher and deeper—despite their fraught history. It is these interactions that led Singh to make as grand and sweeping a statement as he did, and for that statement to continue to have appeal today. Despite the obvious practical obstacles, the first battle is essentially an ideational one—of believing that a 'united' Europe is possible or that borders can be made 'irrelevant'. Some argue that China and India only

became real neighbours with China's takeover of Tibet in 1950 and that complications are therefore only just beginning to show. Nevertheless, it could just as well be argued that the modern international context and the two countries' developmental needs make armed conflict of any kind or scale an extremely dangerous and damaging proposition for both.

EU-led initiatives can be successful because they are aimed at preventing conflict and maintaining peace, and not by means of building up military might, balance-of-power arrangements or military intervention and/or forcible disarmament. They are, on the contrary, aimed at mitigating the conditions that lead to conflict, by encouraging interaction and engagement between peoples and between governments, so as to foster mutual understanding and develop common objectives.

Towards a Trilateral Framework

European foundations and think tanks have long encouraged and promoted meetings between Chinese and Indians at the Track-II (non-official) level as a way of building relationships and facilitating exchange of ideas and opinions. Now it is time that the EU pursued this approach with greater vigour at the Track-I (or official) level, involving not only senior civilian and military officials from all three sides but also mid-career and junior officials. The institutionalization of meetings and processes to encourage the building of personal relationships at the inter-governmental level is as essential for long-term understanding and stability between China and India as the development of greater interactions between business communities and civil societies.

A trilateral Track-I process is also useful for dealing with newer issues that have emerged in the Sino-Indian bilateral relationship, such as over trade and commerce and—more importantly from a long-term security point of view—the sharing of river water. Given climate change, the likelihood of increasing water shortages in both countries and China's talk of harnessing the waters of the Tibetan plateau, with inevitable consequences for India, the two countries need to formulate a mechanism by which their rivers can be managed as a common 'strategic resource' for mutual use and development in order to stave off potential destabilization, if not conflict. With its experience of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the EU is perhaps best placed to show the way forward, both as exemplar as well as a source of technologies for water conservation and environmentally sustainable development.

Common Regional and Global Challenges

China's military modernization is also an important concern in Sino-Indian bilateral relations. Solutions to this issue might be found, however, in a trilateral forum that discusses a third set of issues involving China and India: common regional and global challenges.

The Chinese Navy is a participant in anti-piracy operations off the Somali coast along with the Indian and several European navies. Furthermore, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) is an increasingly active participant in UN peacekeeping operations, in which India has historically been one of the largest contributors of troops and Europe also makes a substantial contribution. The three parties should therefore coordinate their operations and lay the groundwork for joint operations in other geographical areas and against other potential threats.

Nuclear issues—related to energy and non-proliferation—are another common challenge. While the European public has displayed a deep aversion to nuclear power, European companies are still active in the field. Moreover, both China and India will increasingly need to rely on nuclear power to meet their energy requirements and to limit their burning of fossil fuels. Talk of Sino-Indian cooperation on green technology and alternative fuels has so far led nowhere. In the hydrocarbon sector, meanwhile, cooperation has remained extremely limited, as both China and India have preferred to compete with each other. The EU could act as a facilitator in bringing scientists and researchers from both countries together in collaboration with European scientists. Projects such as ITER (an international programme to develop energy from nuclear fusion) already exist, but need to be scaled up at the trilateral level. Projects

should also include a political component, such as discussing nuclear non-proliferation, disarmament and doctrines to encourage confidence-building between the Asian powers.

Trilateral deliberations on the Afghanistan–Pakistan (or Af-Pak) situation could be another important confidence-building measure. While this is fraught with difficulties, given China's and India's differing sensitivities related to Pakistan, Beijing has in recent years moved closer to the Indian position on terrorism emanating from Pakistan. It has also drawn explicit links to Pakistan for the violent activities of separatists in China's Xinjiang province. Even if tackling the entire gamut of the threat emanating from Pakistan might not be possible, there are potential areas of cooperation in dealing with the financing of terrorism from the narcotics trade, preventing the spread and intensification of Islamic radicalism in Central Asia and, possibly, intelligence-sharing.

The EU is Not the US

A multi-polar world—which China, India and the EU claim to want—is best achieved by joint engagement and action. Each of the trilateral processes outlined above offers scope for expansion into larger multilateral forums. However, the mistake so far has been in beginning with large unwieldy groups that look good on paper but have difficulty in achieving much on the ground. While a trilateral forum with China and India will not be an easy diplomatic exercise for the EU to pull off, the mix of issues outlined above might interest both countries. This EU-initiated trilateral discourse certainly has greater potential than talk-shops such as the Russia–India–China trilateral, which shy away from dealing with sensitive issues.

That the EU is not the US will work to the advantage of such a forum, as it allows both China and India to feel as if they are not being lectured. Moreover, the fact that they are not part of a larger multilateral arrangement will ensure that both China and India do not fall prey to the temptation to form blocs against the other.

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