

Old pragmatism in new China

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On landing in China, George Fernandes is said to have received a "red carpet" welcome. Most analysts agree that it augurs well for the Sino-Indian relations. However, one question arises immediately: What does a grand reception in China really mean? Remember Henry Kissinger's secret trip to China in October 1971. He was to make arrangements for the historic Mao -Nixon encounter. While driving to his guesthouse, he felt uneasy as he spotted several slogans against American imperialism. But it was when he entered his hotel room, that he had the biggest shock of his life. In the room there was a board with the slogan in English: "People of the World, Unite! Overthrow the American Imperialists and their Running Dogs!"

That night Kissinger probably did not sleep too well. The next day, when the incident was reported to Mao, the latter's reaction was startling. He just said: "Tell the Americans these are nothing but empty words." It was later explained to Kissinger that it was an old custom of the Xinhua News Agency to display such slogans; the protocol staff had just forgotten to change the old slogans into new, more appropriate ones.

In the end, the visit was extremely successful. Kissinger finalised the details of the summit between Mao and Nixon in February 1972 and despite the cold welcome, it was the diplomatic coup of the century. Many years earlier, in October 1954, at the height of the Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai policy, Nehru had gone to Beijing to celebrate the "eternal friendship" between India and China. The welcome was enthusiastic: The Indian leader was cheered by one million people lining Beijing's streets. An Indian newspaper wrote: "The meeting of Nehru and Mao will change history". During the banquet, Nehru who "spoke in Hindustani was applauded at the end of each sentence." It did not bother him that Hindi was not understood.

At that very time, the People's Liberation Army had just begun the construction of a road on Indian territory (Aksai Chin). It took eight more years for Nehru to realise that a great reception does not always mean 'friendship'. The forth generation of Chinese leaders may not be as calculating as the first, and hopefully the reception given to Mr Fernandes was

sincere, but nothing should be taken for granted. One point is certain: The young generation of technocrats, like their revolutionary predecessors, is remarkably pragmatic. Unlike their Pakistani counterparts, they will not try to harp on a "core issue" and refuse to discuss anything else, though India and China have also their "core" bone of contention: Tibet. Beijing is no doubt aware that without progress on this question, other issues such as the border dispute have little chance to be resolved. But today, like in the past, the Chinese leaders want to emphasise the positive aspects of the relationship. In his welcome speech Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao told the Indian Defence minister: "I think during the past 2,200 years, or about 99.9 per cent of the time, we have devoted to friendly cooperation between our two countries." The 0.1 per cent probably refers to the period 1960-1962.

Defence Minister General Cao Gangchuan told his counterpart: *"With similar national situation, the two countries share a wide range of interests in the world and have identical and similar views on many international issues."* He even added *"the two nations have established and developed a constructive and cooperative friendship on the basis of the five principles of peaceful coexistence."* This reference to the Panchsheel Agreement does not sound good to Indian ears. Was it not the original blunder which led to the debacle of 1962?

On his part, Fernandes admitted that India and China were "good" neighbours and were working together as members of the international anti-terrorism alliance. He said: *"As the two countries confront the same challenges in national security, the two militaries should further cooperation and exchanges."* Now, in spite of all the goodwill declarations, many problems remain. India should not fool itself into believing that everything is rosy and the 0.1 per cent is an affair of the past. Recently the US Department of Defence prepared a report advocating a long-term defence and security alliance between the US and India aimed at containing China which, according to the report, *"represents the most significant threat to both countries' security in the future as well as an economic and military competitor."* One of the conclusions was: *"We (the US) want a friend in 2020 that will be capable of assisting the US militarily to deal with a Chinese threat."*

We could list many hurdles on the way to an eternal friendship, but the first and foremost is Tibet. Would it not be in the interest of India (and also China) to support the peace plan of the Dalai Lama and to make of Tibet a zone of Ahimsa? The time has perhaps come for India to do its utmost to facilitate a peaceful solution to this vexed issue.