



Matter of interesting detail

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Since a few years, whenever Indian dignitaries visit Beijing, they are told by their Chinese hosts that the relations between India and China are 2,000 years old and that during 99.9 per cent of this period the contact has been cordial and friendly. They invariably add: Why so much importance should be attached to the 0.1 per cent? This point was reiterated by Premier Wen Jiabao when he had a 40-minute tete-e-tete with his Indian counterpart during their first encounter at the 10th ASEAN Summit held in Vientiane. Mr Wen once again mentioned that the "aberrations" represented only 0.1 per cent of the long relationship.

It is interesting to stop for a moment on this 0.1 per cent. For Mr Wen and his colleagues of the politburo, it probably represents "a detail" as the French fascist politician Jean-Marie Le Pen once termed the gas chambers during the Nazi regime. But this "detail" is important to India. If Beijing was really serious about putting the past behind to concentrate its energies on the "peaceful rise of China" and the forthcoming Olympic Games, the first gesture that the new Chinese leaders should do would be to apologise to India for the 1962 conflict. While the same leaders are very quick to ask Japan to make apologies for their brutal occupation of China, it does not come to their mind that if they would say a sincere "sorry" to India for their actions of 1962, a great leap would be taken towards rapprochement.

However, sometimes Indians are their own worst enemies and the above line of thought is not acceptable to all in the country. At a recent Student's Union

Council meeting in JNU, a resolution was tabled by the National Students Union of India, the student wing of the Congress. It stated: "The Council condemns the Republic of China for continuing to show Arunachal Pradesh as part of its territory." Shockingly, it was defeated by the votes of a majority of communist student leaders.

But this being part of the Indian democratic "aberration", very little can be done about it. Beijing knows very well that they can bank on it (similar support comes from certain "national" newspapers). However, one hopes that the majority of nations believe that the "border detail" has to be rectified in a dignified manner, and what belongs to Caesar must be returned to Caesar. In the Chinese Premier's mind, the 0.1 per cent aberration period probably refers to the failed negotiations on the border between 1960 and 1962.

Whatever it is, it was Prime Minister Vajpayee who took the initiative during his visit to China in June 2003 and proposed a fast track mechanism to sort out the vexed issue. National Security Adviser JN Dixit (and before him Brajesh Mishra) and his Chinese counterpart have already met thrice. In Vientiane, Mr Wen acknowledged the hard work of the two special representatives; each side congratulated itself on the progress of the talks. But is it the true position? It is said that only the maps for the central sector (UP, Himachal Pradesh) have been exchanged so far. At a time when most cars in the West are automatically equipped with a Global Positioning System, it seems ludicrous that maps of only one sector have been agreed upon. The explanation is that a solution to the border issue is not as simple a proposal as it may appear.

Take Sikkim for example. Though Mr Wen reassured the Indian side that a decision had been taken by Beijing to recognise Indian sovereignty over Sikkim, he had added that it "would be implemented gradually". It is not clear what "gradually" means. Either China recognises Sikkim as Indian or it does not! Where is the "gradualism" in the process? It probably means that Beijing

does not agree on the delimitation of the border between Sikkim and Tibet. One can recall the appalling letters sent by Beijing to Delhi in September 1965 and the threats of siding with Pakistan to attack India due to imaginary Indian crossings from Sikkim into Tibet. The Line of Actual Control having not changed since then, one can assume that Beijing stills claims some Indian territory in Sikkim as its own. During the "positive" talks between Mr Singh and Mr Wen in Vientiane, the latter reiterated the old Zhou Enlai theory: The boundary question was a problem "left over by history" that required "give and take". In layman's terms, the "left over" is the McMahon line, the demarcation agreed on by the plenipotentiaries of British India and Tibet during the Simla Convention of 1914. The Chinese contention is that this Convention was signed during the colonial period and is therefore not valid.

The Chinese argument has no value in international law, as a treaty or an agreement does not depend on a particular regime or the status of a nation at a particular point in time. India has always contended that the border with Tibet was the McMahon Line and that Arunachal Pradesh located south of this line is an integral part of India. Nonetheless the Chinese (who have never set foot in this area) continue to claim this State of India as theirs. In response to Mr Wen who spoke of "mutual understanding, mutual accommodation and political will", the Indian Prime Minister suggested taking into account the "ground realities" to resolve the dispute. However, it is unclear what Mr Manmohan Singh means by "ground realities". Does it apply to Arunachal or Aksai Chin? He was quoted as saying: "We shall show accommodation but accommodation must take into account ground realities." He added, "Mutual understanding should be complete and mutual accommodation should be realistic."

The Chinese position is very clear and has not changed since the late '50s. I recently spent time researching the French diplomatic archives in Paris (unfortunately, one has very few options as the Nehru Papers in the Jawaharlal

Nehru Memorial Fund's almirahs are all classified by the Government which does not want the public to know the circumstances which led to the 1962 "Himalayan blunder"). I went through thousands of pages of reports, analysis and letters on the genesis of the conflict particularly during the period 1958-1962. The reading of these papers confirmed what I already knew from other sources, the only objective of the Chinese in questioning the McMahon line and its so-called legacy, was to be in a position one day to exchange Arunachal (then NEFA) against Aksai Chin.

The French diplomats in their briefing to the French ministry (in the early 1960s) made it amply clear that NEFA was only a bargaining tool and the PLA's advance towards Assam in October-November 1962 was only a way for Mao to strengthen his "diplomatic" cards. Beijing already knew that one day or another, in one month or in one decade, India would come to the negotiating table and when this happened China would be ready for the "deal".

For the past 45 years the Chinese position has remained unchanged. Today they are still ready "for mutual accommodations" taking the ground realities into account. They are in possession of Aksai Chin, India "occupies" Arunachal, let us accept the ground realities! Today, is Delhi ready to make a deal that Nehru always refused and which ultimately broke his life? It is significant that the Indian Prime Minister quoted from Nehru's speech at the Asian Relations Conference in 1947: "Asian leaders must work jointly to draft a new future." Did Mr Singh remember the map of Asia displayed behind the speaker that day? There was a buffer zone between the two giant nations and the representatives of Tibet were sitting on the dais with other free nations of Asia. It is another "detail".