

China's Asia Strategy and President Xi's Visit to India

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President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping is the first head of the state to visit Delhi after the Narendra Modi led government came to power in May 2014. The Modi government has taken to proactive diplomacy, with Prime Minister Modi's first three foreign visits, to Bhutan, Nepal and most importantly to Japan. Each of these have some China element them. At the same time China and India seem to have developed a shared understanding with regard to BRICS and BASIC.

Under Xi Jinping, China has developed a coherent and comprehensive Asian diplomatic strategy in the last eighteen months or so. While a discussion on the immediate elements of President Xi's India visit is timely, it needs to be contextualised within how China perceives itself as well as its role in broader Asia.

There are broadly four events-landmarks that highlight China's new Asian strategy under President Xi Jinping. The first among these is the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) work forum on diplomacy in the periphery that was held in October, 2013. Second is President Xi Jinping's address at the fourth Summit Meeting of Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and the third is China's promotion of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) can be taken as the contours of the new Chinese approach to the regional issues. Fourth, the New Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), which China has promoted rather vigorously, can be treated as the Chinese methods for implementing its perception of the Asian engagement in the future.

The work forum on diplomacy in the periphery followed from the idea of great national rejuvenation which put friendly relations with the neighbouring and regional powers as an extension of the idea of national rejuvenation. The work forum also aimed to bring coherence between the strategic objectives and diplomatic outreach. China sees deepening economic ties with Asian countries as part of its mid term strategic objective after the achievement of short term objective of peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region and before the long term objective of national reunification is achieved. Xi's proactive foreign policy can also be seen from the fact that both he and Premier Li Keqiang had visited neighbouring countries as their first foreign destinations after assuming complete power in March 2013. Just before the work forum, President Xi Jinping also visited 5 countries in Southeast Asia.

The work forum China has also sought to actively shape the regional security order. At the CICA meeting held in Shanghai in May 2014, President Xi envisaged a regional security mechanism that “stresses common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security to tackle rising challenges facing the region”. He added that “Asia should oppose beefing up a military alliance targeted at a third party, and any attempt to dominate regional security affairs or infringe upon the legitimate rights and interests of other countries” and that the “security problems in Asia should eventually be solved by Asians themselves through cooperation”. Xi's remarks resemble the idea of Asia for Asians and criticise and exclude any role played by any external power, i.e. the United States, as a balancer or a security provider in Asia. As a method of building an alternative Asian security architecture, Xi also said, Asia needed to “focus on development, actively improve people's lives and narrow down the wealth gap to cement the foundation of security”.

The idea of Maritime Silk Road follows from these two above-mentioned constructs as China shows that it's ready to deepen economic cooperation despite strategic insecurities in the Asia

Pacific region. MSR is seen as a pet project of President Xi and it is an important initiative for Chinese investments in Southeast and South Asia.

China's promotion of the AIIB follows from President Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the Boao Forum for Asia in April 2013 where he had stressed on "expansion of regional connectivity, building a regional financial platform, advance economic integration and harnessing of competitiveness". AIIB is poised to focus on development of major infrastructure projects and gels well with China and APEC's plans of improving regional connectivity in Asia. While China has invited India to become a founding member, India is yet to respond to the Chinese invitation. AIIB aims to work at enabling economic growth by infrastructure growth as against the Asian Development Bank the mandate of which is poverty alleviation.

Thus, regional engagement and extra-regional exclusion are the two pillars of China's new Asia strategy under the leadership of President Xi Jinping. Viewed in this context President Xi Jinping's visit to India is an extension of China's engagement strategy in Southeast Asia despite the ongoing territorial disputes and strategic conflicts. Xi's China wants to convey to the region of its preeminence economic position and strategic ambitions and is no more shy of making these public. It is for India to draft its response in accordance with its national interests.