

A Tale of Two Countries: India and China in our Times

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I am honoured to present the IFFCO Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Lecture today. I belong to a generation of Indians born after independence whose childhood was spent in the Nehru years. Prime Minister Nehru as I remember him was an inspirational figure, Chacha Nehru to us children, red rose in his buttonhole, a *Bharat Bhushan*¹, a leader in whose hands we, young children at that time, felt we were well protected. Years later, when I became a professional diplomat, I was witness to the imprint that Jawaharlal Nehru had left on every aspect of our foreign policy, our dealings with the outside world. Modern India owes an immeasurable deal to this great architect of a democratic, secular India.

Allow me to begin on a personal note. In the summer of 1984, my life took a turn very different from what I had imagined previously. I began to work on China, more specifically, its relationship with India. A little more than two decades prior to that, our two countries had fought a brief conflict, although the “protracted contest” between us had dragged on even after that forty-day war had ended. At that time, in the Ministry of External Affairs, the China desk in the East Asia Division tended to exist in the shadows – bereft of real activity, a kind of maintenance operation, there because it was a fixture reminding us of the bitterness and the betrayal that most Indians felt about China and the battles of 1962. The popularly held belief was that the events of 1962 had broken the spirit of Prime Minister Nehru and hastened his demise.

In the years that followed, India’s relationship with China traversed an interesting trajectory – one where the two countries made deliberate and conscious efforts to ensure peace and tranquillity on their borders, deepen their dialogue not just on border-related issues, but also on trade and commercial matters, and on cooperation in

¹ Literally, a jewel of India, or one who adorns India

various areas of their national growth and development, as also on global issues of common concern. It has been my privilege to witness these developments from the perspective of the long years that I have been associated with this key foreign policy relationship.

India and China as is often said by scholars of history, have a “thousand year relationship”. Tan Yun Shan, the Chinese scholar who devoted his life to the study of India and China at Cheena Bhavan in Santiniketan called Sino-Indian relations “the most important of the most important”. At the time of our independence, the great Indian scholar of China, Prabodh Chandra Bagchi recalled the words of an ancient Chinese pilgrim to India, who referred to the complex relationship between the two countries, thus: “ The road is long; so do not mind the smallness of the present. We wish you may accept it.” What Professor Bagchi was referring to was the need for forbearance, the knowledge of the history of our relations with China, and to understand that many years of perseverance and joint efforts by the two countries are required if we have to attain the goal of a grand harmony in our bilateral ties. This will not be easy – we are both old civilizations and young nations, with our power in the process of being restored, populated by the dreams of our young people who know very little of each other.

China is our largest neighbour. Today, the world has woken to the presence of a “rejuvenated” China that has put imperial decline, famine and revolution behind it, and grown over the last nearly four decades on an average of 10 per cent per year. According to the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, “The Chinese Dream is the Dream of Rejuvenation”. The narrative today in China is about rejuvenation, about wealth and power, about recapturing greatness. Now what is the core of India’s dream in the 21st century? Many years ago, Jawaharlal Nehru spoke of our potential to be a strong and great nation. He said that this was not just a dream, that it was a fact. Successive governments and generations of Indians have tried to give structure and substance to this vision. Today, especially after the overwhelming democratic mandate that brought Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Government to power, the articulation of the India Dream is very clear and precise. We dream of making India strong and powerful by concentrating on accelerated economic growth, removing inequality, ensuring infrastructure development, the skills development of the vast numbers of our young population below the age of twenty five, with our emphasis on Make in India,

Digital India and Clean India, the removal of corruption, the strengthening of national defence and internal security, and our readiness to assume greater responsibilities on the world stage as a global power. China's late leader Deng Xiaoping used to say that development is the hard truth. This equally applies to India today. Without development, human and economic, we will not be able to achieve our goals of greatness and the recapturing of our ancient pre-eminence.

In many ways, despite the difference in political systems between India and China, the national goals of the two countries do not contradict each other; rather, they mirror each other in their aspirations and the determination to achieve the goals of national development and international prestige and influence. China is generally regarded as being ahead of India in the race to attain the goal of becoming a developed country. China's economic reform process had a lead of about thirteen years vis-à-vis India's launching of reforms in 1991. All its economic indicators are well ahead of India's and its human development index has been better than India's. Its life expectancy, its literacy rates, its levels of maternal and child mortality, levels of nourishment of its children, per capita income are all areas where China has seen dramatic development. Today it is classified, as an upper middle-income country while India is still a lower middle-income country. In terms of purchasing power parity (PPP), China is the largest economy in the world, and India the third largest. It is true that China's economic growth is slowing down, but the accelerated development since the nineteen nineties particularly, has propelled China to a leading position among world economies. India's growth is expected to exceed China's rate of annual growth from now on, but there are still distances to be covered before we can bridge the development gap with China. At the same time, we can also learn from the shortfalls and the downside of China's rapid pace of development, especially the environmental impact, the loss of agricultural land to urban development, the breakdown of rural family structures, over investment in construction, and the struggles of migrant labour among others.

Because we are the largest countries in the world in terms of our populations, and are leading Asian nations, India and China tend to be bracketed together and comparisons of the two abound. Even our two leaders, Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi are proud nationalists;

the first leaders born after their countries were freed from foreign occupation, and they have complementary visions of making their nations strong and developed.

We have a competitive co-existence with China. Our relationship is a complex one. There are several shades of mutual suspicion beneath the surface and several degrees of alienation, too. China's reaction to India's growing ascendance on the global stage is at best, articulated with ambivalence. The overarching compass of India-China relations today therefore, is marked by caution and mutual wariness, and like a pot of food over a small, continuous fire, you have to pour in cold water to keep it from boiling over. But let me add that this is not a situation of hopelessness. The very fact that we have maintained peace on our borders and endeavoured to build a multi-faceted relationship is a tribute to the mature judgment and foresight of governments on both sides over the last four decades.

A small rewind would be appropriate to recall how India and China related to each other a century ago. Our immortal poet and Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore viewed the India-China relationship through the geo-civilizational prism and not through the angle of geopolitics. As a visionary and writer, it was natural that Tagore's perspective should be rooted in the civilizational ethos of the two countries. "The memoried light of comradeship"²: these were the words Tagore used to describe the past ties through ancient history between India and China. He was one who saw India's strength as stemming from the capacity for civilizational dialogue, of creating the empires of the mind. He spoke of the "India of no nations", advocating an "Advaita of humanity, 'Viswabodh' or awareness of the world, a world of grand harmony. In Chinese tradition there are similar concepts that speak of the unification of the universe, humankind and nature. When Tagore went to China in 1924, he was greeted thus by the scholar Liang Qichao (pronounced Lee Yang Chi Chao): "We are brothers, India is our elder brother and we are the younger. This is not only an expression of courtesy. We have got ample proof of that statement in history. Indians did not covet

² Tagore's words, spoken to welcome Xu Beihong, the famous Chinese painter to Santiniketan in 1940 were: "China and India shared the dawn of a great Renaissance, and even in these days of political cataclysm the memoried light of that comradeship remains".

anything from China. They gave us the *sadhana* of freedom and *maitri*.”

Not all his Chinese interlocutors were similarly adulatory of Tagore. There were young Chinese university scholars who criticized Tagore’s “paradise of the spirit of poetry” saying that Oriental culture was no solution to China’s problems and that what China needed was the culture of the machine gun to drive out imperialist aggressors. Tagore, however, stood his ground saying that he retained the right as a “revolutionary” to carry the flag of freedom of spirit into the shrine of the Chinese ideals of material power and accumulation. His establishment of the Cheena Bhavan, as a part of his university at Santiniketan was an expression of his interest in scholarship on China and it was at Santiniketan that the first generation of Indian Sinologists thrived, including Prabodh Chandra Bagchi and Amitendranath Tagore among others. Today, Tagore is well remembered in China, and he is seen as an anti-imperialist, a patriot and a mystic. His poetry and literary works are read by millions of Chinese, their leaders included.

When Jawaharlal Nehru made his first visit to China in 1939 on the eve of the Second World War, the Chinese Communists had still to assert their dominance over China, and Nehru met with only the Chinese Nationalist (Guomindang) leaders during his brief visit, which was curtailed due to the outbreak of the war. However, there was great admiration within the Indian freedom movement for China and the struggle of its people against Japanese invasion and conquest. The older generation in India remembers V. Shantaram’s nineteen forties film: “Dr. Kotnis ki Amar Kahani”, the story of Dr. Dwarkanath Kotnis who participated in the Indian Medical Mission that was sent to China to assist the Chinese during their struggle to liberate China from Japanese occupation and who died in China while serving the Chinese people. In China till this day, he is regarded as a national hero although we in India have largely forgotten him.

Gandhiji saw Nehru as a devoted friend of China and after Indian independence; China was in many ways, one of the cornerstones of Nehruvian India’s foreign policy. Nehru did not want to see China isolated on the world stage and suggestions that India should replace China in the U.N. Security Council were rejected by him since he felt that India, whatever her intrinsic claims to membership of the

Security Council had no wish to secure the seat at China's expense. Subsequent events, the differences with China over the boundary, and ultimately the conflict of 1962, obliterated the very foundations of Nehru's China policy.

On closer examination, however, to call Nehru blind to the threat to India from China would be misplaced. The late Frank Moraes, one of India's leading journalists in the fifties and sixties, recalled in his book, "Witness to an Era", how when he went to China as a member of India's first cultural delegation to the People's Republic in 1952, Nehru in briefing the delegation had said: "Never forget the basic challenge in South-East Asia is between India and China. That challenge runs along the spine of Asia". Speaking in 1959, Nehru drew reference to having visualized, since 1950, the picture of two powerful states coming face to face with each other on a "tremendous border". His biographer, Michael Brecher, noted in 1958 that Nehru was not "oblivious to the inevitable long-run rivalry between Democratic India and Communist China for the leadership of Asia. He knows full well, but never admits in public that the ideologically uncommitted countries of the area are watching the contest between Delhi and Peking, particularly in the economic realm, to see with system can 'deliver the goods'." Nehru was also ahead of his times in assessing the Chinese communists as nationalists first and Marxists second. He advocated a policy of "cautious friendliness" towards China. In a conversation with the British politician, Ernest Bevin in 1950 he said, "Chinese psychology, with its background of prolonged suffering, struggle against Japan, successful communist revolution, is an understandable mixture of bitterness, elation and vaulting confidence to which the traditional xenophobia and present-day isolation from outside contacts have added fear and suspicion of the motives of other powers: For inducing a more balanced and cooperative mentality in Peking, it is essential to understand those psychological factors."

Today, in India the scars of the 1962 conflict with China are still embedded in the national psyche. It is less so in China, where there is little public consciousness of this trauma to the relationship. In the China of today, increasingly powerful and influential on the global stage, nationalist ire is increasingly turned on neighbours like the Japanese and no opportunity is forfeited to remind the population of 1 billion and more Chinese about the wrongdoings of Japan during the period it occupied China between 1938 and 1945. If there is

negativity about India it is usually centred on the presence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on Indian soil and the activities of Tibetan refugees in India. Despite India's frequently iterated stand on Tibet – that it is a part of China – there are many in China who see our shelter and asylum for the religious head of the Tibetan people as a source of insecurity for their country.

When the Chinese army entered Tibet in late 1950, the Korean War had also commenced, and Tibet was scarcely on the international radar. While the Indian government tried to express concern about the events in Tibet and stressed the need for a peaceful resolution of the situation with respect for the principle of Tibetan autonomy (the word independence was never mentioned), the Chinese were harsh in their criticism of our remonstrations. Prime Minister Nehru himself regarded it futile to take on China on this issue – he felt that there was not much any country, leave alone India, could do to prevent the assertion of the Chinese hold on Tibet. But he remained a steadfast friend of the Tibetan people, and despite the accommodation of the Chinese presence in Tibet, through the Panchsheel Agreement of 1954, he was sensitive to the sufferings in Tibet, and in 1959, supported by the overriding sentiments of the people of India, he gave asylum to the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetan refugees. China, on the other hand, saw the developments relating to Tibet post-1959 as having a direct bearing on the border problem between India and China. China's non-acceptance of the McMahon Line - which defines the boundary between Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet - stems from its refusal to accept the right of Tibet to have concluded an international agreement in 1914 relating to its boundary with British India, independent of China.

The concessions made to China on Tibet notwithstanding, Nehru was determined to safeguard India's territorial integrity in the border areas with China. Indian presence in the areas south of the McMahon Line was fully consolidated by 1951, including in the vital area of Tawang, seat of a very important Buddhist monastery with historical linkages with the Tibetan Buddhist monastic tradition. By 1953, the decision was taken by the Indian government to show our boundary with China on maps published by the Survey of India as defined and final. The assumption was that the Chinese would not raise boundary-related issues given the fact that in 1954, as provided for in the Agreement between India and China on Tibet (the Panchsheel Agreement) India had given up its special privileges in Tibet and

recognized Tibet as a “region of China”. Subsequent events leading to the conflict in 1962 revealed the strategic errors of such an assumption. By 1957/58 China had built a highway through territory claimed by India in the Aksai Chin area of Ladakh, triggering off a stormy reaction in India and then she began to question the validity of the McMahon Line also. The boundary was clearly disputed by China and Nehru’s China policy became politically unsustainable. Attitudes hardened on both sides and the scope for negotiation was drastically reduced.

India regarded its boundary with China as fixed by tradition, by custom and by treaty while China stressed that there was no mutually agreed boundary between the two countries. It must be acknowledged that the Chinese government did put forward proposals that signalled an approach to the settlement of the border during the visit of Premier Zhou Enlai to India in April 1960. But by then, Nehru’s ability to respond was limited and circumscribed by hostility to China within the Cabinet as well as in Parliament. Public opinion was firmly convinced that the Chinese had betrayed the friendship of India. “Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai” became an empty slogan.

Let us now fast forward to the eighties. Some years prior to that – in 1976 – on the initiative of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, both governments of India and China took the decision to restore diplomatic relations between the two countries to the Ambassadorial level. Smt. Gandhi famously said: “We cannot take the stand ‘here we stand and here we shall remain’ ” in our relations with China. Dialogue had finally re-commenced after the hiatus created by the 1962 conflict. By 1981, discussions relating to the boundary question had also been initiated. Foreign Minister level visits were exchanged with Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee visiting China in 1979 and Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua coming to India in 1981. The border areas remained quiet after the Tulung La incident of October 1975. No shot has been fired between India and China since then although transgressions of the Line of Actual Control in the border areas continue to take place from time to time and receive wide coverage in the Indian media, particularly.

The landscape of our relations with China is however, by no means smooth. In the summer of 1986, a serious development took place.

This was in an area south of the McMahon Line in a place called Wangdung in the locality of a stream/rivulet called Sumdorong Chu very close to our border with Bhutan in north western Arunachal Pradesh. The Chinese came into the area just as the snows melted and just before our own personnel moved to reoccupy their encampment at the end of the cold season. The situation was serious because armed border personnel of both sides were confronting each other in close proximity. It was a classic standoff. Today, in the time of 24/7 television and social media, you can well imagine what a firestorm this development would have caused. In 1986, this was not the case. While the External Affairs Minister did make a statement in Parliament and there was concern expressed across the political and party spectrum, the situation did not spin out of control in the public domain as it had in the critical period before the 1962 war.

Our decision to grant statehood to Arunachal Pradesh in December 1986 stoked further Chinese ire. Clearly, tensions were mounting and each side – India and China – were jockeying for advantageous positions in Sumdorong Chu. Meanwhile the Chinese position on the boundary question was clearly becoming more rigid. While in the early eighties, their leader Deng Xiaoping was still advocating a “package solution” to the problem tying it to Indian concessions being made in the Western Sector (Ladakh/Aksai Chin) and Chinese concessions in the East (seemingly coming largely to terms with the reality created by the McMahon Line) by end-1985, they were insisting that the Eastern Sector (Arunachal Pradesh) was the sector of the largest dispute and that India should first make concessions in that sector, based on which the Chinese would consider concessions in the Western Sector (Ladakh).

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi then took a bold step. He decided to extend the olive branch and initiated steps to make a visit to China – something that had not been attempted since Prime Minister Nehru’s visit to that country in October 1954. It was like a shot in the dark. But it found the right target. The Chinese leadership were enthusiastic about such a visit. It showed how even in the worst of situations, creative diplomacy has a rationale and a place. As it turned out, the visit of Rajiv Gandhi to China in December 1988 became a turning point in the relationship. It helped initiate steps to defuse the situation in Wangdung and also created a template for India-China relations – one where the search for a solution to the boundary question would continue but would not hinder the

development of relations in other fields including trade and economy, as well as people-to-people ties. Regular leadership-level dialogue between the two countries became a pattern followed to this day.

In the years that followed that historic visit, tensions on the border were well managed by agreements to maintain peace and tranquillity in the border areas and for confidence building between troops on both sides, starting from 1993. India and China stated their readiness to avoid the threat of force, or use of force, in dealing with the border situation. In 1992, our then Defence Minister, Sharad Pawar visited China – the first such visit after the 1962 conflict. Contacts between the military establishments of both countries were initiated. There was a frequently reiterated resolve to seek a settlement to the boundary question that was fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable. The Special Representatives on the boundary question, designated by the leaders of both countries continue to make serious efforts to arrive at a negotiated settlement of the boundary, based on the Guiding Principles and Political Parameters agreed on by both governments in 2005.

In this day and age, when there is little agreement between the government and opposition, it is important to highlight the fact that there was political consensus in support of the outcomes of the Rajiv Gandhi visit and the approach initiated during his trip to China was carried forward by Prime Ministers V.P. Singh, Chandrasekhar, Narasimha Rao, Deve Gowda, I.K. Gujral, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and Manmohan Singh. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also essentially adopted the same model, while highlighting the economic and commercial component of the relationship, in reaching out to President Xi Jinping and the Chinese people.

This is not to discount the fact that areas of dissonance exist in our relations with China. Scholars list nuclear issues, Tibet, the border problem, China-Pakistan relations, and regional competition between India and China as such areas of dissonance. Following our nuclear tests of 1998, relations with China were negatively impacted when the then Defence Minister George Fernandes was reported as having said that China was India's number one threat. China's reluctance to endorse the U.S. recommendation to grant an exception within the Nuclear Suppliers Group to engage in nuclear commerce with India following the historic India-U.S. Nuclear Deal is also well known.

China's consistent support for the development of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program is also well documented. On Tibet, the presence of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan refugees in India is an area of dissonance. The unsolved border problem is another while regional competition in Asia and the Indian Ocean pits China against India (and countries like Japan and the United States). I would like to dwell on this last factor briefly.

It was from the seas that the Chinese became targets of western mercantilist and imperial exploitation in the 19th Century and recrudescence of Chinese nationalism does not allow the world to forget this. Memories of the century of humiliation are constantly kept alive through school textbooks and media presentations. Maps particularly chart the cartography of national humiliation, delineating territories that have been 'lost' to China. China's vehement emphasis on protecting her territorial claims in the East and South China Seas has set several alarm bells ringing in the region, particularly among the countries of ASEAN. The growing maritime reach of the Chinese Navy in the Indian Ocean has generated the image of the "String of Pearls" – i.e., a Chinese presence in the ports of neighbouring countries of India and in the Indian Ocean. The case of Chinese involvement in building ports in Sri Lanka is one example. "Why should the Indian Ocean be Indian?" one Chinese defence official is said to have famously asked in the early nineteen nineties. Chinese reactions to the maritime exercises that the Indian Navy conducts with the United States and Japan have been uniformly negative. The region we live in has to deal with this growing Chinese muscularity and assertiveness.

Isolating China by creating a web of partnerships and alliances may not be the solution to these developments. China has to be enmeshed in a web of engagement that will promote maritime security, economic cooperation, disaster prevention, relief and management, anti-piracy, security of sea lines of communication, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. This is the best way to contain its strident expressions of nationalism and insecurity. "Socialize, integrate, deter and reassure China", one observer noted not long ago. That is good advice, in my view.

The China-Pakistan equation has been called an Odd Couple relationship. Until the border conflict of 1962, China and Pakistan were scarcely friends. Their relationship grew out of the

estrangement between India and China and blossomed into a full-blown high value strategic partnership in the years that followed. Pakistan has remained a steadfast friend of China and answers to China's beck and call although the reverse may not be equally true. Even as India endeavoured to improve its relations with China from the nineteen eighties onward, China continued to assist Pakistan in developing its nuclear weapons capability and its missile defences. Today, a China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which is an offshoot of China's much vaunted One Belt One Road strategy is being developed through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir with its culmination in the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar. China's relationship with Pakistan has brought the former dividends in terms of pressure on Islamabad to control the activities of Islamic Uighur separatists who indulge in acts of terrorism and violence in the province of Xinjiang. This is a relationship of mutual benefit and Pakistan, particularly, thrives on the military-strategic connection with China even though there is very little economic content in the relationship.

For India, the China-Pakistan relationship is a challenge that has persisted through the years, despite improvements in our relations with China. Through such networks, there is a conscious Chinese tendency to constrain India and to work for a non-India-centric equilibrium in South Asia. China-Pakistan cooperation in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir and also China's reluctance to confront and condemn terrorism directed against India from Pakistan through groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba are other areas of persistent concern for India.

Balancing these many factors in our relationship with China is no mean task. At the same time, the economic logic of closer ties with China must not be denied. China is today our largest trading partner in goods, and we have welcomed Chinese investment in railways and infrastructure building in India. China's speed of implementation of projects is worthy of emulation. Lessons can be learnt from China's experience of growing her manufacturing sector where it is now the "factory of the world". This has particular relevance for our Make in India strategy.

Prime Minister Modi's Make in India strategy aims at increasing the manufacturing sector's contribution from 17 per cent of India's GDP in 2013 to 25 per cent in the next decade. China's then leader, Deng Xiaoping in 1992, launched a similar initiative. At that time China's

share of global manufacturing was 2.6 per cent. After that date, China's manufacturing share grew with rapidity – reaching 24.9 per cent of global manufacturing in 2013. What lessons can be learnt from China? The first is the building of infrastructure – roads, rail, waterways, power, ports, airports and telecom. China spent 8.5 per cent of GDP on infrastructure during this period compared to India's 4.7 per cent. Secondly, as has been noted, China let selected industries and geographical regions take the lead in ramping up manufacturing. The sectors selected were export-oriented consumer goods such as textiles, shoes and toys, and infrastructure and real estate-related industries such as steel, cement, glass, construction equipment and shipbuilding. The east coast took the lead, especially the coastal areas from Shanghai to Guangdong. These pioneering cases became examples for other areas to learn from and emulate. Thirdly, China dismantled barriers to inbound foreign direct investment (FDI) and also created several special economic zones which process rapid access to needed licenses and permits. And fourthly, the proportion of high school students graduating from vocational schools has steadily grown larger so that 90 to 100 per cent of the young workers joining China's factories are well trained. It is critical to close the gap in vocational skills if Make In India has to succeed. China's experience has proved this³.

Many refer to the 21st century as the century of China and increasingly, of India too. China's seemingly spectacular growth over the last three decades has captured the imagination and attention of the world as also its rapid ascension to global power, prestige and influence. More and more observers are beginning however, to see that China's economic growth is tabling out, and slowing down as its population ages and the numbers of young people in its work force dwindle. India's sweet spot today is created by the fact of the rise in the rate of its economic growth, its demographic dividend of a young population, its information technology strength, its cultural influence in the region and the world, and its democratic society and openness of functioning. The latter two factors are what give India (in contrast to an authoritarian China) a special place in the global graph of re-emerging nations.

³ These arguments are well made by U.S.- based scholars Anil Gupta and Haiyan Wang in their analyses and commentaries on India-China relations.

It would appear that the task ahead for India is to focus on growing its economy at a rapid rate in an inclusive and sustainable manner so that its population is lifted out of poverty, and its young population can fulfil their dreams and aspirations. While doing so, India will also have to ensure and uphold the smooth functioning of a democratic society with respect for diversity, whether religious or linguistic. Setting our house in order, making it a better place for our one billion people and more, should be our priority and maybe in that sense, we could take a cue from the twenty four Chinese character advice of the late Deng Xiaoping in 1990: *Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership.*” This is not to say that we must copy Deng’s advice in its entirety but we can learn to be self-effacing, focus inwards on our national priorities because there is so much to be done, wait for the consolidation of our progress and growth before we indulge in self-congratulation or behaviour perceived as arrogant particularly in our neighbourhood.

Our relationship with China will continue to pose challenges for India as the future beckons. On the global stage, India is increasingly seen as the Asian country that has the capacity and potential to balance China. China’s assertive regional presence, particularly its growing military capabilities, its territorial disputes with neighbours, both land and sea, its giant economy is all real factors that cannot be wished away. We will cooperate with China in many spheres, but we will also be competitors particularly in our search for energy and resources to fuel our economies. We will have to be strategically astute and unswerving in our determination to accelerate the task of our national development in order to cover the distance lost to China, and also practice smart diplomacy in our region, particularly in our neighbourhood, in Southeast Asia, and in the Indian Ocean region, to win friends and partners to advance our national interest.

This is not to suggest that the door for dialogue with China should be closed. What we have achieved over the last three decades should not be set aside. On the contrary, the edifice of bilateral relations should be further built on so as to open new areas of cooperation and prevent conflict and build a mature, ‘big country’ relationship. This apart, pragmatism, flexibility, far-sightedness and leveraging the prestige that devolves on India due to her solid democratic credentials and political legitimacy, should be the instruments that we should deploy on the global stage while we bide time for that

day, in the not too distant future, when India will be an undisputed global frontrunner, leading by the virtue of economic strength, sustainable development, good governance, and the power of her example. It is also my view that a settlement of the boundary question with China is a complicated issue that will take time and patience to resolve and that there is no magic formula to settle this issue, presently.

Finally, allow me to revert to the personal. When I look back on all I have witnessed in our relations with China, it is with the realization that change is what defines this dynamic. When I went to China first with the film personalities Shabana Azmi and Sai Paranjpe in the spring of 1986, little did I realize that I was going to a country which I would see change dramatically over the next few decades. China at that time was still a country emerging out of the bitterness of the Cultural Revolution and taking its first, tentative steps towards reform and economic liberalization. I still remember the millions of bicycles thronging the roads of Beijing (there were scarcely any cars to be seen, only a few Mao era vintage vehicles that looked more like battle tanks!), the hotels with the sayings of Chairman Mao emblazoned in their lobbies⁴ (unseen in the market-oriented China of today), the populace in blue tunics rather than the largely ubiquitous western attire of today, the mix of Stalinist style and traditional Chinese architectural ambience of China's big cities (today internationally famed architects are invited to design futuristic buildings to showcase modern China in many Chinese cities), how Shanghai reminded me so much of Mumbai with its thronging streets (not any more). I remember the tremendous hope generated in China by the town and village enterprises that were aimed at transforming the rural countryside and the frisson and thrill of hearing our national anthem played outside the Great Hall of the People and seeing our flag unfurled for the first time since 1954 when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was ceremonially welcomed in Beijing in December 1988. I recall visiting Beijing soon after the Tiananmen Square tragedy of June 1989 – and witnessing empty streets and the eerie, stony silence of a city of so many million inhabitants. I have wonderful memories of my month-long pilgrimage across the Kumaon Himalayas to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar in the summer of 1986 and seeing a very remote part of Western Tibet in all its pristine glory, as also of a subsequent week-long trip to Lhasa and

⁴ One favorite slogan was: "We, the Chinese people, have friends all over the world!"

some other Tibetan towns in 1992. In many ways my fascination for studying China, the Himalayas and Indo-Tibetan history began with a childhood meeting I had with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in February 1960.

Many years later in 2006, I was appointed by our Government as India's first woman ambassador to China – a cherished dream come true for me! The China I returned to at that time was so different from the country I first visited in 1986 – it had pole vaulted into modernity with a boldness and confidence unmatched in our time. I saw also that progress had come with a price tag in terms of the uprooting of rural populations, the travails of migrant labour in China's booming cities and factories, the destruction of its environment by carbon emission and air pollution and the drying up or contamination of water bodies. But overall, the image of a country and a national spirit that like the Chinese fable of the old man who could move mountains, can overcome monumental challenges is inescapable. So also, one must note that the Chinese people are ever willing to modernize, with an almost cult-like fervour, that they study Chinese history very intensively and scientifically, and are confident about their Chinese identity and their resolve never to be humiliated by foreign domination ever again. We, in India, would do well to make a science of China-watching and learn from these epic changes and the laser-like determination with which our next-door neighbour has accomplished them. The Chinese mind today is in many ways an open one, ready to absorb new ideas and new concepts, and to face the world with confidence.

A closed mind is the enemy of progress. As the Chinese proverb goes: *"When the winds of change blow, some people build walls and others build windmills."* May our country prosper in peace, in tolerance, and with an unquenchable thirst for progress, better and better democratic governance and inclusive, sustainable development. Let windmills multiply, let walls come tumbling down!

Thank you.