

GETTING AWAY WITH ILLUSION

DEspite the high-pitch January parley between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabo, India and China—building the perennially elusive bridge of friendship—require believing that they can really create deep trust and lasting peace. 2008 is not 1962. And yet the legacy left by the India-China border war continues to haunt the peoples of two most populous countries of Asia. Beijing has not budged an inch from its stated position on the boundary dispute, albeit New Delhi seems to be hovering around a mellowed stance which remains as vague and contradictory as it was in the 1960s. In other words both sides simply do not know how to make parallel lines meet though they promise all the time that an amicable solution to the vexed question of border demarcation is very much in sight. The problem is that they do not know the deadline. The new dimension that has added to the troubled India-China diplomatic manoeuvre is joint military exercise. If everything goes according to schedule, they will hold a second joint military exercise this year; the first one was held last month in Kuming in China. But these exercises are part of a wider political game aimed at playing with the gallery. In reality Mr Singh's maiden visit to China was merely a "return visit"—a formality—following upon those of premier Wen Jiabao in 2005 and President Hu Jintao in November'06. As a result even the official media treated it as a business as usual diplomacy without trying to discover any-thing historic in the joint communique. But Mr Singh, however, has returned with a Chinese trade enquiry in civil nuclear energy. As the controversial Indo-US nuclear deal is almost certain, China being a major nuclear have, with sufficient expertise in nuclear power production, has every reason to tap Indian market. Whether Uncle Sam will allow the Jiabos to do business in this field in India is another matter.

Boundary question apart, China's geo-political equation in South Asia has not undergone any radical change over the years, notwithstanding the disappearance of its one time principal enemy—Soviet Union. Nor does India act as a client state of Moscow any more. Yet China's strategic policy in South Asia like America's continues to be Pakistan-centric and Pakistan despite being haunted by the ghost of its own creation—religious extremism, is always too eager to serve as counter-weight to India in regional power balance. Pakistan has no border problem with China. Instead it has allowed China to have its way in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir sector much to the irritation of India. When it is South Asian drama, what is true of US is also true of China. New Delhi has no option but to remain satisfied with status quo-ism in India-China friendship culture. And Beijing has been responding in so many ways for so many years with the clear message that friendship cannot improve simply by 'glossing over the border dispute'.

Jiabo's assurance to Manmohan Singh that China favours India's greater role in the UN Security Council is unlikely to get translated into China's affirmative nod for India's bid for a permanent seat in the Council with veto power. Both America and China are looking for Indian market and both of them are doing well ruining India's traditional industries and agriculture as well. Maybe, business considerations tempt them to keep India's Security Council hopefuls in good

humour. Both Washington and Beijing are targeting India to dump their nuclear reactors. As nuclear industry has no hope of its revival even in USA, third world countries with a little bit of industrial base seem to be the logical destination of the industry.

China is unlikely to make any concessions on the boundary line. Nor can India make another Himalayan blunder by pursuing a forward policy. The problem lies in the fact that India cannot expect a compromise on its terms. Not very long ago one top Chinese diplomat raised the issue of Arunachal where the 6th Dalai Lama was born. In other words the Lama was born in China's Tibet territory and the Indian authorities were at their wit's end to challenge the Chinese contention. Taiwan is part of China and yet they can wait for years before getting it finally integrated with mainland China. The Chinese approach to the border stalemate is to continue the game of talking because they need tranquillity to become an economic giant and access to global market. It's not that easy to capture European and American markets despite flooding of those markets with cheap Chinese (or what they call one-hour technology) products, rather non-essential products. But they can always make their presence felt in South Asia and South East Asia. Despite their best efforts India-China bilateral trade may not take any quantum jump anytime soon. It cannot unless the Chinese succeed in resolving the boundary question to their satisfaction. If the policy-makers in New Delhi think they will be able to maintain the status quo in the Himalays simply by prolonging the border-discussion, they are living in a world that doesn't exist. Just on the eve of Mr Singh's mission to Beijing India's foreign ministry revealed how the number of inclusions by Chinese troops in Arunachal increased in the recent past. Also, in May last year the Chinese government refused to issue a visa to an official from Arunachal Pradesh.

Mere handshake does not mean much in the world of real politik. They may talk endlessly over the improvement of bilateral relations without really improving the situation. And China won't go beyond a certain point without legitimising its claim over the disputed areas in the Himalayan wilderness. Communists, pro-Chinese or otherwise, in India have virtually no role to play in improving India-China bilateral relations other than hoping somewhat against hope that official efforts will succeed in normalising relations. In their formulation the centre of economic gravity of the world is shifting towards Asia making India and China big players in market mechanism and they are quite happy deriving comfort from the development. But the centre of gravity won't shift much without India recognising China defined boundary line. But communists, being wise enough have all along been evasive about how to accommodate China's position into India's framework without saying goodbye to India's claim. □□