

# China India Relations and SAARC

*Zhao Gancheng\**

## **Abstract**

[Sino-Indian relations have improved in recent years but there remains a visible lack of mutual trust, particularly at the level of masses. This has been a major obstacle in the way of developing an all round relationship as political relations are, to a large extent, a manifestation of public opinion. SAARC presents an appropriate forum to remove misconception through increased exchanges and to foster a friendlier relationship between the two countries that will also be beneficial for the whole region. – *Eds.*]

China-India relations are complex owing to many aspects. One of them is about cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts. Despite stories on some negative events taking place over recent years in the political and security arena, both sides realize that promoting cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts is a good way to improve the bilateral relationship, and actually, it is a necessary way to get mutual understanding, without which it would be almost impossible to maintain a sustainable China-India relationship. For the two Asian neighbors, which are rising fast, as far as people-to-people contacts are concerned, the first thing they need to do may be to find a proper platform to develop such contacts. Even though it looks like a bilateral business, a proper multilateral framework could work even better. In this context, the South Asia Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) seems to be a proper forum.

The year 2010 saw the sixtieth anniversary of China-India diplomatic ties. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao took the chance to pay a formal visit to both India and Pakistan in December that year, where the Chinese leader expressed his sincere wish to look forward to more people-to-people contacts between China and South Asian nations. Apparently, this aspect has so far been a weak part for China's engagement with the region. It can partially be attributed to the insufficient contacts to the lack of progress of political relations. It is particularly visible in China-India relationship. It is also argued that the lack of mutual interest in cultural respects between both China and India leads to the situation. It is actually part of the outcome of the cultural globalization dominated by the American supremacy. The world is increasingly becoming West-centered. Neither the Chinese nor Indians are really interested in the uniqueness of the cultures other than that of the West. This criticism typically reflects a pessimistic

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\*Zhao Gancheng is Senior Fellow and Director, Center for South Asia Studies, Shanghai Institute for International Studies.

estimate of the current trend developing among developing countries. Though it is not yet known what the real reason is, the fact is that, for instance, both China and India produce hundreds of movies respectively on an annual basis, the huge audiences of our two nations do not have much chances to enjoy movies produced by the other country. Instead, people rush to cinema to watch Hollywood movies, and perhaps movies produced by other Western countries. One needs to think about the phenomenon seriously.

### **Current State of Bilateral Relations**

People-to-people contacts usually have two parts. One is the political part, which implies that the two peoples may find uncomfortable to establish closer contacts when the two nations are in a political stalemate for whatsoever reasons. The other part may be the cultural one, which requires appropriate interest of the two peoples in each other. That interest may include a political aspect, but not necessarily do so, because politics changes too fast compared with cultural values that exist in the minds of ordinary people. Beginning with this consideration, an analysis on China-India people-to-people contacts could find a few features demonstrating some of the specifics of the bilateral relationship, and also look for the possibility of engaging the contacts in the context of SAARC development.

First, the political relationship between China and India does impact their people-to-people contacts, mostly negatively, unfortunately. In other words, the trend of people-to-people contacts between China and India is likely to be coincidental with that of political relations. It is not unnatural to see it, because political relations are, to a certain extent, a manifestation of public opinion of the two nations, and also a reflection of people's feelings to the other people. In the case of China-India relations, this feeling is fluctuating, experiencing lots of ups and downs. In the first decade of the 21st century, the two nations tried hard to rebuild up political trust. In the year 2003 when Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee visited Beijing, the two sides tried for the first time to define the essence of the bilateral relationship. In the joint statement afterward, the two sides announced a new definition, which focused on constructive and cooperative partnership. That was very useful for improving people-to-people contacts. But the reality was yet a bit far from expectation. Actually, the following years witnessed a number of setbacks in the bilateral relationship, which in turn reduced public interest of the two peoples in each other. In the year 2005 when Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited New Delhi, the two sides decided to upgrade the bilateral relationship into "strategic partnership for peace and prosperity," politically speaking, it would play a crucial role in the development of China-India relations in the years to come, but the reality again went against the expected direction. In retrospect, it could be argued that the timing to upgrade the bilateral relationship might not have been mature. Even though there was clear political will on both sides to push ahead the bilateral relationship,

constraints were there including the border issues, water resource issues, and the Dalai Lama issues, etc. that constantly cause friction and mutual accusations between the two nations. It would be difficult not to see the increasingly negative influence resulting from it, which would create unfavorable conditions for ordinary people to take interest in the other country in a positive way.

Second, media plays an important role. In contemporary world, nobody would deny the significance of mass media in encouraging or discouraging the public interest between countries. In case of China-India relations, media of the two countries sometimes play a not so encouraging role. The fact that media tends to criticize what is going on between the two nations reflects the deeply-rooted mutual distrust. Since the border conflict, nearly half a century has passed, but the legacy remains, and the media even encourages negative sentiments about it, leading to increasing distrust. For instance, over the recent years, there have been constant reports, some of which have gone so far as to argue that a war between China and India may not be inconceivable for the boundary dispute. But the reality has little to do with that sort of exaggeration. Though governmental officials on both sides have been making attempts to correct the mistaken perceptions in time, the damage has been visible. When one checks out the comments in the net about the negative stories in the media, very hostile sentiments could be easily found and sensed, which would in turn reduce public interest on both side in each other.

Third, people-to-people contacts need to engage private sectors and NGOs. As far as current situation is concerned, government plays a decisive role in implementing a series of programs such as invitation to the youth each other to make official trips. In 2010, when the two countries celebrated the 60th anniversary of diplomatic ties, the cultural festivals were held respectively in both nations. That is good, but not enough.

Historically, the people-to-people contacts between China and India were conducted both at official and private levels. In many cases, private exchanges were the main part of the contacts. For instance, when Buddhism came to China from India, Chinese believers rushed to India, and even today, many Chinese would choose India as their travelling destination because of the religion. The role of government in these contacts differentiated according to its attitude to the religion. In history, when the Chinese emperors favored Buddhism, exchanges would be encouraged, and the opposite also took place indeed. But the governmental behavior was not decisive because people's interest in India's culture that led to the creation of the great religion would prevail. In modern history, religion may no longer have played crucial role. Private exchanges would depend more on business and other aspects of culture such as literature. In 1920s, Rabindranath Tagore, the famous Indian poet, paid a couple of visits to China. These were

cultural trips extensively reported in Chinese media when he met with many of Chinese intellectual elite, though Mr. Tagore's view about western style modernization caused great debates between him and some most well-known Chinese writers. In retrospect, even though most Chinese did not know much about the British India that time, nor did their governments encourage or support exchanges like these, the communication between a great man like Tagore and Chinese elite must have helped promote mutual interest of both sides in each other.

Today, given the modern technology for communication and transportation, there are sufficient reasons to believe that countries like China and India should develop more contacts at the level of ordinary people and by private sectors. We have witnessed the immense increase of commercial business between the two sides since the beginning of the 21st century, and it will continue to develop into even higher level. In the meantime, with business enhancement, the government of both countries can take more responsibility to push ahead personal exchanges, and governmental programs aside, both sides have to think of more practical ways to stimulate private interest in each other.

It is undeniable that there are substantial problems existing between China and India. People-to-People contacts, no matter how flourish, may not provide solutions to these problems. But that does not decrease the significance of people-to-people contacts. In fact, lots of historic lessons prove that people-to-people contacts could play a role in reducing political pressures when a crisis comes up. Besides, one could even argue that there is no need to demand people-to-people contacts to serve for political purposes, because such contacts are part of confidence building process which would consolidate the basis for better understanding. On an improved basis of mutual understanding, distrust which is yet a big problem between China and India would decline.

### **Beyond Bilateral Exchanges**

The above discussion is mostly about what has happened on bilateral level. Many analysts have also touched upon another important aspect of China-India relations, that is, this relationship has gone beyond bilateral, because they are two most rapidly rising powers in the world. As the rising powers, both China and India are going to take more international obligations and responsibilities. For this matter, South Asia is a region that could test both China and India for their capacities.

China, geographically, may not be considered as a South Asian nation, but it is very important neighbor to all the South Asian nations. Besides, China is greatly concerned about South Asia because the region shares the huge border areas with China. Xinjiang and Tibet are the two most important frontier provinces where the Chinese ethnic people are concentrated. In history, the two areas played an important

role in people-to-people contacts between China and South Asia. In contemporary world, there have been turbulences and conflicts in the region. However, culturally speaking, both Xinjiang and Tibet remain as China's fronts to maintain such contacts indeed. In addition, the dynamics also includes other aspects such as border trade and other activities. Physically, China shares borders with South Asian nations. India is no doubt the most important one with yet unresolved border disputes, but with other South Asian nations, China tries hard to promote more exchanges. From Chinese perspectives, SAARC may be an appropriate good framework, in which China could develop its all-round ties with South Asian nations, especially in people-to-people contacts.

So far, people-to-people contacts between China and South Asian nations are based on bilateral approaches, just like that of China and India. In 2005, China became the observer to SAARC, and potentially, China would like to become a full member. Apparently, SAARC is a useful entity to which China could build up more access for more comprehensive engagement with the region. Firstly, China has already established a number of exchange programs with South Asian nations. Now it might be time for China to think of establishing some programs at regional level. For instance, China could support the initiative of South Asia University by providing assistance and collaborating with major South Asian nations. Besides, China could also send students and teachers when the university is established. The identity of that particular university will help build up more communications for understanding between China and South Asia as a region. Last year when Shanghai hosted the World Expo 2010, nearly all South Asian nations participated except Bhutan. It should have been a good chance to have a SAARC pavilion. Instead, the Expo only had EU and other international organizations' pavilions. Today, most Chinese do not have an image of South Asia, but only that of individual South Asian nations. SAARC is precisely the representative to play a role in helping the outside people build up such an image and identity. After all, South Asian nations share a lot in common.

Secondly, economic interest between China and South Asia is increasing. India takes the lead in South Asian economic development. China is very encouraged to see the prospect of FTA in South Asia, which was put forward in the SAARC summit, and is expected to develop in the framework of SAARC as well. China's economic engagement in South Asia could be further promoted by developing more exchanges in this regard between China and SAARC. Now that China-India economic exchanges have been on a fast track, and the prospect for China-SAARC economic engagement is good. In December 2010 when Chinese premier Wen Jiabao visited Delhi, the two sides decided to enhance the bilateral trade to annual 100 billion US dollars level by the year 2015. Judging from the pace of the development, most analysts believe this target would be achieved ahead of schedule.

In this context, China's engagement in the South Asian economy has to be put on agenda. SAARC is a right vehicle to carry on the task. Based on the fast development of China-India economic exchanges, China and SAARC may work out a more extensive plan to include regulation set-up, market access, investment guarantee, arbitration mechanism, etc.. China is looking forward to more economic engagement in South Asia, believing that this would be the best part of people-to-people contacts, and would play a positive role in reducing political distrust and increasing mutual benefits.

Thirdly, in crisis management, SAARC is a right instrument to launch initiatives. South Asia is at the forefront of anti-terror campaigns. Unfolding developments in the regional situation such as announced American withdrawal from Afghanistan and more exploration of reconciliation process in the region, SAARC provides a valid platform to operate regional cooperation. China has been the victim to international terrorism. China would like to develop more cooperation with South Asia. Again, such cooperation is usually conducted through bilateral means. China's engagement with South Asia in this respect could be carried out in the framework of SAARC such as anti-terror training of police. That sort of activities may be also included in the category of people-to-people contacts. Moreover, in the common efforts to build up civil society that is the way to eliminate the root cause of extremist forces, China and SAARC could develop many programs to promote the process and to strengthen mutual learning.

### **China and SAARC: The India Factor**

These are only some of the examples for interactions between China and SAARC. The linkage between China-India relations and China's engagement with SAARC lies in the fact that India is a dominant player in SAARC, and that China's engagement with and participation in SAARC will to certain extent depend on India's gesture. In other words, good development of China-India relations would help promote China's engagement with SAARC. By the same token, the existing problems between the two that prevent them from developing better people-to-people contacts would do the same to China's participation in SAARC. At this point, one may argue that China's participation in SAARC has not been developing well over the years. There are many factors, and China-India relationship may be only one of them, but an important one.

China is determined to take more proactive participation in SAARC on the basis of all round development of its ties with South Asian nations. With India, China has been making enormous efforts to address the existing problems, whether they are the historically left issues or newly emerging obstacles. In terms of people-to-people contacts, China and India have worked out some popular programs like sending hundreds youth to each other for friendly visits annually. Further, the two countries are trying best to encourage mutual

investment, which will help improve people-to-people contacts, too. Meanwhile, China has devoted to developing exchanges with other South Asian nations. With Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, China has developed programs with all the circles of their society, starting from governmental projects like infrastructure constructions and social facilities to cultural exchanges. When the World Expo 2010 was held in Shanghai, these South Asian nations sent various kinds of performers to present their unique cultures to tens thousand audience. The great display of the South Asian traditions and cultures left great impression. Considering all these wonderful contacts, one tends to believe it is now time to seek a more mature relationship between China and SAARC by inventing more programs to encourage people-to-people contacts, and that China's deeper engagement with SAARC will not do any harm to any parties.

### **Conclusion**

China-India ties are part of China's engagement with SAARC. Even though there are existing problems between the two, and India sometimes takes suspicions about China's interactions with other South Asian nations, China's strategic goals in South Asia are clear. China opposes any potential approaches that are not in favor of regional stability in South Asia. Based on that target, China sincerely believes that pushing ahead regional integration in China's periphery has to be a fine approach, and China has to become proactive participant in regional processes, and in South Asia in particular, because South Asia's stability is relevant to China's national security and its own stability from within. For this matter, China will encourage all kinds of people-to-people contacts with South Asia. When China and India cannot solve their existing problems for the moment, China believes that the problems must not prevent neither side from developing their respective periphery policies in a normal way, because such policies pursued by China and India respectively are aimed at regional stability and lasting peace. Therefore, China and India share lots of things in common, and can work out more feasible approaches under circumstance. Encouraging China more deeply engaged with SAARC has to be one of the good options as far as India is concerned. In this context, China has expectation for the future when China and India will develop a new and harmonious relationship in the framework of SAARC, thus encouraging South Asia regional integration to develop on a fast track. That will benefit all the parties.