



The one who reached out to China

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Highlights

- India-China relations have come a long way from the period of enmity and bitterness that followed the 1962 war.
- True, they have not returned to the cheery days of Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai, but the maturity with which the leaders of both countries handled the Doklam crisis last year shows that the ties between New Delhi and Beijing are now based on a sound realisation that neither can ignore, much less antagonise, the other.
- Rather, comprehensive mutual cooperation between India and China is increasingly being seen as an imperative for peace, stability and progress in Asia and the world.

Change in attitude

- In this evolution of India-China ties, one leader who made a seminal contribution was Atal Bihari Vajpayee.
- A politician in the non-dogmatic mould, Vajpayee was open to learning the lessons of history and, thus, revising his own views from the standpoint of India's national interests.
- By the time he became the Minister of External Affairs in the Morarji Desai government, and particularly when he served as Prime Minister, Vajpayee was a changed man.
- He had come to firmly believe that for India to emerge as a major global power, it must normalize relations with Pakistan (which meant finding a permanent and amicable solution to the Kashmir dispute) and comprehensively improve relations with China (which meant resolving the vexed border problem in the spirit of mutual compromise).
- Vajpayee's visit to China in February 1979 ended the chill created by the 1962 war.
- It was the first high-level political contact between the two countries after 17 long years.
- His ice-breaking meeting with Deng Xiaoping, then China's paramount leader, started a new chapter in India-China relations that has continued till date.
- The creative solution that Vajpayee and Deng discussed to resolve the vexed border dispute was, in a nutshell, this: Do not let normalisation of bilateral relations become a hostage to the resolution of the border dispute.
- Develop bilateral relations in an all-round manner.
- Simultaneously, try to resolve the border dispute through dialogue and by ruling out the use of force to change the status quo along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).
- The next major milestone in India-China rapprochement was Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in December 1988.

A different China

- Vajpayee's visit to China in June 2003, witnessed a big breakthrough in bilateral relations.

- The China he saw this time was very different from what he had seen in 1979.
- Nowhere was this difference more striking than in the Shanghai skyline.
- Vajpayee and his delegation went on a boat ride along River Huangpu and what we saw on Pudong district, facing the historic Bund on the other side of the river, were glistening skyscrapers.
- During this visit, India recognised for the first time that the “Tibet Autonomous Region is an integral part of the People’s Republic of China”.
- Some foreign policy experts, including some serving diplomats, were not in favour of this recognition.
- They felt it would prevent India from using the “Tibet Card” against China.
- But the realist in Vajpayee was convinced that his decision, apart from being in line with the unchangeable situation on the ground, was a helpful step towards improving bilateral relations.
- On its part, the Chinese side recognised Sikkim as a State of the Indian Union.
- The visit also saw an important breakthrough in trade relations — bilateral trade started rising rapidly thereafter.
- An important upshot of the visit was the decision to fast-track the talks on the border dispute by initiating the framework of Special Representatives of the two Prime Ministers driving the dialogue.
- Accordingly, Vajpayee’s trusted National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra and China’s State Councillor Dai Bingguo were appointed as the two special representatives.
- Vajpayee and Premier Wen Jiabao also agreed that the joint work on the clarification of the LAC should continue smoothly, which helped in maintaining peace along the LAC.

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