

# THE ONE WHO REACHED OUT TO CHINA: ON ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Human Values - Lessons from the lives and teachings of great Leaders, Reformers and Administrators

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.

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. As a swayamsevak of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Vajpayee's views on Pakistan and China in the 1950s were quite negative. However, 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 normalise 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.

In a tribute to Deng on his birth centenary in 2004, Vajpayee recalled: "I have pleasant memories of my meeting with Deng Xiaoping. The unfortunate military conflict in 1962, caused by the border dispute, had left a scar on the centuries-old affinity between the two great nations of Asia and the world. I called on him in the Great Hall of People in February 1979. I must say that the genuine warmth with which Deng Xiaoping received me — I too reciprocated that warmth in equal measure — helped in overcoming the psychological barrier and looking forward with optimism to a positive new chapter in our bilateral relations."

Deng told Vajpayee: "We do have some issues on which we are far apart. We should put those on the side for the moment and do some actual work to improve the climate to go about the problem. Our two countries are the two most populous countries in the world, and we are both Asian countries. How can we not be friends?"

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).

In December 1982, when a delegation from the Indian Council of Social Sciences Research called on him in Beijing, Deng referred to his meeting with Vajpayee and reiterated his pragmatic

view on the border problem: “When I met your former foreign minister in 1979, I put forward a ‘package solution’ to the problem. If both countries make some concessions, it will be settled... The problem between China and India is not a serious one... The problem we have is simply about the border. Both countries should make an effort to restore the friendship that existed between them in the 1950s. As long as we go about it in a reasonable way, I think it will be easy for us to settle our border question. Because this question has a long history, you have to take into account the feelings of your people, and we also have to take into account the feelings of our people. But if the two sides agree to the ‘package solution’, they should be able to convince their people.”

The next major milestone in India-China rapprochement was Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s visit to China in December 1988. Deng told Gandhi, “Welcome... my young friend. Starting with your visit, we will restore our relations as friends. There was unpleasantness at each other. Let’s forget it. We should look forward. Do you agree with me?” Gandhi responded: “Yes.”

Vajpayee’s visit to China in June 2003, when I had the honour of accompanying him, 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. After Vajpayee’s demise, Wen Jiabao sent a heartfelt condolence, calling Vajpayee an “outstanding politician”.

I met Mr. Dai in Beijing last year. He said, “Mr. Vajpayee was a leader with a vision and strategic thinking. He did not want the past to determine the present. He started a new era of cooperation in India-China relations. He had an open mind on the border issue and wanted it to be resolved soon on the basis of give-and-take. I was very hopeful about making progress.” He added: “Prime Minister Narendra Modi belongs to the same party as Mr. Vajpayee. He has an opportunity to become a New Vajpayee.” How true!

*Sudheendra Kulkarni was a close aide of Atal Bihari Vajpayee in the Prime Minister’s Office between 1998 and 2004*

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