

Right now, India should not get distracted by geopolitical issues

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Elizabeth Roche

Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore and a China expert, is in New Delhi to attend the ninth Pravasi Bharatiya Divas—an annual gathering of the Indian diaspora. In an interview, he spoke about India's engagement with China and South-East Asia. Edited excerpts:

In the past two years, we have seen a very aggressive China—not only towards India but also towards neighbours in South-East Asia. What are the reasons for this?

I don't think there has been any fundamental change in Chinese foreign policy. They have clearly made more mistakes in the last 12 months. They seem to be more assertive in their claims over the South China Sea. They are perceived to be more assertive vis-a-vis India. But I think their overall foreign policy hasn't changed. I think they are still abiding by their principle that they are going to focus on internal economic development; they don't want to get distracted by foreign policy disputes. And their main challenges are internal, not external.

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But why did the Chinese make these mistakes?

I don't think we know enough of how the Chinese decision-making process takes place. It could be due to the succession issue (a new generation of Chinese communist leadership will take office in 2012); it could be due to the PLA (People's Liberation Army) becoming more assertive. But I think that while there have been incidents, while the Chinese have mishandled, they haven't changed their fundamental foreign policy.

How do you see India-China relations turning out this decade?

I think this is a very crucial decade in India-China relations. As you know, time is on India's side because the Indian economy is growing; if you grow at 8 or 9%, your economy will double in eight or nine years. Time is also on China's side. But time is not on the side of the United States of America. American power has peaked globally and, while it may grow absolutely as a relative share of the global GNP (gross national product), American power will shrink. So there is some pressure on the part of United States and the West to try and come to terms with China before it becomes too powerful. But there is no such pressure on India.

In fact, in many ways, the long term prospects of growth for India in some ways are better than China because you have a demographic dividend. China will become old before it will become rich. So,

right now, don't get distracted by geopolitical issues. Why get sucked away by geopolitical issues when you can move them aside and say "I will deal with them later on?"

How do you see India-China ties evolving when the new Chinese leadership steps in?

Nobody knows what the real views of the next generation Chinese leaders are. But it is a fact that with each passing decade, China is developing a leadership that is more and more exposed to the world...the current rules governing the international order, the 1945 rules-based order that America and Europe created, the two greatest beneficiaries of this order are China and India because you are the fastest growing economies now. China does not want to upset that 1945 order. And I suspect the new leadership is savvy enough to realize that this is not the time for China to do that. No one knows, of course, what they will be like, but I suspect they will carry on the current policies.

The thorniest of issues between India and China are the disputed border and Chinese support to Pakistan. How do you see these two issues affecting ties this decade?

The good news is there has been no violence at the border since 1962...I think that should be the No.1 priority. Even if you don't get the border dispute resolved, we can live with the status quo...20 years ago, when China had much stronger leaders, they could make territorial concessions. Right now it is harder for Chinese leaders to make territorial concessions because with the opening up of the Chinese society, with Chinese Internet community playing an active role in shaping public opinion...the Pakistan issue is a much more difficult issue to handle, and I can understand why the Indian government feels very upset. The Chinese have had a long-standing policy of standing by their allies even when the allies, sometimes, do things to aggravate them—for example, North Korea. But, just to get the scales right, India's No.1 obsession is Pakistan.

By contrast, China's No.1 obsession is the West and how the West could undermine the growth of China. Just imagine if India had to deal with a Pakistan that was far more powerful than India. The reason I mentioned this is that you have to understand that the Chinese have much bigger fish to fry in many areas and they have their own strategic obsessions, and relatively speaking, South Asia comes quite low in their strategic priorities.

When you meet Chinese decision makers, what do you tell them? Do you tell them that as a major power, they should behave like one—be sensitive to the concerns of smaller neighbours?

When they (China) made mistakes, I have written on that. In the past, you could not criticize China at all. The Chinese were very prickly. I wrote this article which was critical of China a few months ago and subsequently, I went to China, I met everybody; they didn't mind the criticism. So they are now willing to listen to criticism in a way they were not ready to do before. And that is why I think you need to have greater and deeper engagement between China and India. When I come to India, I can certainly feel a very strong obsession with China. I was in China a few weeks ago and there was almost no mention of India. When I gave an interview to CCTV4, which is watched by 100 million people, I said the 21st century belongs to China and India and nobody objected.

India has just joined the East Asia Summit. What kind of a role do you see for India there?

As you know, Singapore lobbied very hard to get India into the East Asia Summit. We believe that it is good to have more great powers involved in the region. The main challenge will be the US-China relationship. That's the largest, most difficult geopolitical relationship in the world. And India can play a role as a balancer in the US-China relationship.

What about India and Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean)?

I think Asean should be seen as a geopolitical gift to India, because Asean is providing the geopolitical platform which enables India to get integrated into East Asia. And the paradox here is that the reason Asean can provide the diplomatic leadership to create regional organizations that bring everyone together is because Asean is weak. Precisely because it is weak, it is able to bring all

the powers together and that is why this geopolitical platform that Asean provides is something India should be taking greater advantage of.

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