Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s Visit to India

It is now possible to be cautiously optimistic about relations between China, India and Japan, which may soon be put on a normal, stable footing - an essential prerequisite if we are to see an improvement in the overall situation in the Indo-Pacific region. That is despite the fact that the recent visit by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to India has rather dampened hopes in this area.

But, as always, the grey clouds hanging over the Indo-Pacific Region will inevitably turn out to have a silver lining, leaving political observers with grounds for hope. Take, for example, the visit by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to India and his talks with India’s Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of India, Ajit Kumar Doval, just three days after the Japanese Prime Minister’s trip to the subcontinent.

Significantly, this was the first visit since the latest crisis in relations between the two Asian giants. Unfortunately such crises have been a regular occurrence throughout the history of the two countries’ joint relations. The most recent deterioration in relations between India and China occurred following the notorious clash in the Himalayan border region of Ladakh in Summer 2020.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the two countries’ foreign ministries did not break off contacts in response to that crisis. They continued to communicate on an ad hoc basis in third countries, for example, during the most recent meetings at ministerial level under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. But official invitations and high-level visits between the two countries were put on hold for a while.
As for the most recent visit, it was part of Wang Yi’s latest foreign tour, which took place in Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and Nepal - in that order. But before looking at the content of the talks held in Delhi, the author will be focusing for a while on the first stop in the tour, Pakistan, a de-facto nuclear power and a key player in relations between China and India.

One of the events in Wang Yi’s trip to Islamabad had an impact on the third stage of his tour, his visit to India. In Islamabad he not only took part in talks with Shah Mahmood Qureshi, his Pakistani counterpart, on various aspects of relations between the two countries, but he also addressed foreign ministers of member states at the most recent meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. His participation was without precedent in the history of the OIC, and he only attended the meeting because it coincided with his visit to Islamabad, and because, as the host nation, Pakistan was in a position to issue a special invitation.

According to Indian media, in his address Wang Yi’s expressed support for Palestine’s and Kashmir’s “justified struggles for freedom”. But according to China’s Xinghua News Agency he made no mention of Kashmir. Whatever the truth of the matter, the Indian Foreign Ministry immediately criticized the speech, as India sees the entire Kashmir region as falling within its political jurisdiction. Just as China views control over Taiwan as an exclusively internal matter.

Nevertheless, despite the above incident, Wang Yi’s visit to Delhi went ahead. Which, as already noted, is quite impressive, given the current state of relations between China and India. However, in his meeting with his Chinese counterpart, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, the Indian Foreign Minister saw fit to recommend China to “pursue an independent policy”. He was presumably referring to Beijing’s policy in relation to India and specifically the Kashmir problem, a highly sensitive subject for Delhi.

In fact, it is good advice, although difficult to put into practice. After all, having developed good relations with Pakistan, now its key ally in the region, China is well aware of the latter’s problems, the most serious of which remains Kashmir. Naturally, India understands this, and despite Wang Yi’s comment on the issue in Islamabad, still chose to go ahead with the meeting.

In Pakistan this deal is seen as a response to the Indian Air Force’s receipt of the first of the 36 Rafale fighter jets which it is buying from France. A comparison of the technical specifications of the two aircraft shows that the J-10C, often claimed to be a copy of the famous US-made F-16 fighter jets, and the French Rafale are broadly comparable. But the Chinese jet is just over a quarter of the price of the Rafale.

To return to the main subject of this article, in addition to the rather unexpected raising of the Kashmir issue the talks in Delhi covered the situation in the border territory of Ladakh, which is largely due to the fact that many parts of India’s almost 4,000 km border with China are not clearly defined.

It is hard to imagine the Chinese Foreign Minister objecting to his Indian counterpart’s quite reasonable claim that there can be no talk of “normal mutual relations” when the situation in the two countries’ border zone is “abnormal”. The Indian Foreign Minister was referring to the incident that occurred in Ladakh almost two years ago. But since then there have been many rounds of talks between military delegations from both countries, which have resulted in significant progress. The positive reception of India’s new ambassador to China, who took office at the beginning of March this year, has been seen largely as a reflection of this progress.

The fact that the Chinese Foreign Minister also visited Afghanistan and Nepal on his trip does not really affect the general trend in relations between the two Asian giants. India and China are competing for influence over both of these countries. In one way, this is completely natural. But this rivalry has not yet reached the stage where it
presents any serious threat to relations between India and China.

It should also be noted that none of the five countries referred to in this article (two of which are among the select club of major world powers) have joined the sanctions which the US and its allies have imposed on Russia in response to the conflict in Ukraine. And that should be seen as one of the key factors serving to increase common ground and help boost the relations between China and India.

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