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CHINESE STATE COUNCILLOR AND PUBLIC SECURITY MINISTER ZHAO KEZHI'S VISIT YIELDS LITTLE TANGIBLE

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Chinese State Councillor and Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi arrived in India on October 22, for visits to Delhi and Mumbai at the head of a 20-member security delegation. It included 13 officials of China's Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and 3 from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA). He later travelled to Bangladesh where too he had high-level meetings including with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. India and Bangladesh are both, coincidentally, headed into national elections in the coming months.

The visit followed that by Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe to India in August and is obviously part of efforts to portray that relations are improving following the meeting between Prime Minister Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Wuhan in April this year. Notwithstanding this and highlighting their territorial claims, Chinese troops intruded into Arunachal Pradesh just days prior to Zhao Kezhi's arrival. During the Chinese Defence Minister's visit too, a similar intrusion by Chinese troops in Demchok in Ladakh was vacated weeks after his departure. Important for Chinese President Xi Jinping will be Zhao Kezhi's discussions on the issues of Tibet and the Dalai Lama and his assessment of the likely results of India's upcoming national elections.

In addition to meeting his host Home Minister Rajnath Singh, 64-year old Zhao Kezhi was received by India's National Security Advisor and Prime Minister. That India did not genuflect to avoid giving imaginary offence to China and Kiren Rijiju, Minister of State for Home and Member of Parliament from Arunachal Pradesh, attended the meetings is encouraging. Perhaps to add apparent substance to the visit, a security cooperation agreement was signed between India and China. The agreement covers areas like intelligence sharing, exchange programmes, sharing of best practices, cooperation in disaster mitigation besides others. In material terms, though, there is likely to be negligible, if any, cooperation in these areas.

Actually, there is no possibility of substantive cooperation in counter-terrorism so long as China remains protective about Pakistan and seeks to insulate it from accusations by other countries. The Intelligence agencies of both the countries have very close and long-standing ties. China's interests and its relationship with Pakistan are far too strategically important for any change in China's policy towards Pakistan and the current uncertainties regarding the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) will serve only to strengthen Beijing's commitment to Pakistan. Confirming that talks on terrorism made no headway, China's stand on cooperation in counter-terrorism was made public at the routine Chinese Foreign Ministry press briefing in Beijing on October 23, barely a day after the Indian and Chinese delegations

met in New Delhi. In response to a question about Beijing's position regarding Pakistan harbouring internationally acknowledged terrorists like Masood Azhar, Hafez Sayeed etc., the official Chinese spokesman Hua Chunying emphasised that there is no change in China's position, which it has made known on a number of occasions. The presence of the MPS Director General of Counter-Terrorism, An Weixin would have been cosmetic.

On the contrary, the Chinese delegation would have again pressured India to re-open talks with the new government in Pakistan and resolve the Kashmir issue. It would have also emphasised the importance of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor and the need to ensure its security.

Beijing's immediate concern about Uyghurs transiting through Pakistan into China's Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) are, it feels, currently being adequately met by Pakistan's security forces. Chinese agencies also have a free hand inside Pakistan. China and Pakistan are additionally cooperating and furthering each others' interests in Afghanistan.

The other issue troubling China is that of the Rohingyas who, according to Beijing, are being radicalised by Al Qaeda. Beijing is concerned that these elements will cross into China through the porous borders with Myanmar. The delegation, which arrived in the Bangladesh capital, Dhaka, on October 26, would have had this on their agenda. China has earlier suggested that India should cooperate in this area. On the other hand, Zhao Kezhi's delegation is very unlikely to have offered any material information regarding Indian Northeast insurgents visiting Yunnan province and its capital Kunming to purchase arms from Chinese suppliers there.

The Tibet issue undoubtedly ranked high on the Chinese delegation's agenda and would have been pushed hard. It is likely they sought to exchange views on the Dalai Lama and urged curbs on the Dalai Lama's set-up in Dharamshala, accusing it of infiltrating and carrying out anti-China activities inside Tibet. The Chinese have an interest in the situation surrounding Uyghen Thinley Dorje, recognised as the Karmapa by the Chinese authorities and the Dalai Lama and who 'escaped' from Tsurphu Monastery in Tibet, particularly in the backdrop of the numerous news reports -- many inspired -- in recent months. These reports mentioned he was unhappy and felt constrained in India and that he had acquired a passport of the Dominican Republic. The statement jointly issued on October 11, by Uyghen Thinley Dorje after his recent meeting with the other claimant Thaye Thinley Dorje, earlier backed by Shamar Rimpoche, would have further perked Chinese curiosity. Reliable reports suggest that China made conciliatory overtures to Uyghen Thinley Dorje while he was in New Jersey.

There are a large number of Kagyupa adherents in Tibet and the Himalayan border belt and they have a dominating presence in Sikkim and Bhutan. Clear pointers to the importance of Tibet-related issues are the inclusion in the delegation of Zhang Hongbo, Director of Public Security of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Ms Hou Yanqi, of MoFA who has served in its Department of External Security Affairs which also looks after matters relating to Tibetans outside China and Wu Wei, Counsellor in MoFA's Department of External Security Affairs.

Zhang Hongbo, an ethnic Han who was born in Sichuan and joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1985, has been working in TAR since at least 1982 indicating he is either an 'Aid Tibet' cadre from Sichuan or that he grew up in Tibet. He has extensive experience in security work and his last appointment was as Mayor of Shigatse, one of TAR's two largest cities and also the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, till July 2018, when he was appointed Director of TAR Public Security. He will have detailed knowledge of Tibetan issues including the interactions between Chinese authorities and Tibetan Buddhist monks in India and elsewhere.

Similarly pertinent is the inclusion of 1970-born Ms Hou Yanqi, Deputy Director General of Asian Affairs in MoFA. An Urdu-speaking specialist in Pakistan and Afghanistan affairs – her husband works in Afghanistan – she was awarded the 'Tangha-i-Pakistan' by Pakistan President Zardari in March 2013. She has served in the Department of External Security Affairs of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs which would have given her insights into issues concerning the Tibetans and Uyghurs. She is backed by Wu Wei, Counsellor in MoFA's Department of External Security Affairs.

Other issues like cross-border movement of Uyghurs, complaints of Chinese businessmen about limited duration visas and India's objections to the issue by China of stapled visas for residents of Arunachal Pradesh and J&K etc. would have been on the agenda.

Zhao Kezhi will have raised trade issues and expressed the hope that India does not follow the US and impose restrictions on Chinese telecom, IT and other companies operating in India. An offer to try and redress imbalance in trade may have been suggested.

An important aspect of Zhao Kezhi's visit will be the assessment he provides to Chinese President Xi Jinping after in-house discussions with the Chinese Ambassador and others he would meet. His briefing will be important as it coincides with the building election tempo in India. In addition to being Minister for Public Security, Zhao Kezhi is also a long time confidant of Xi Jinping.

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