

## **Remarks at launch of *The Border Issue and Beyond***

23 March 2009

The Foreign Secretary, Mr. Shivshankar Menon, has cautioned both India and China against resorting to protectionism to deal with the world economic crisis.

Mr. Menon was speaking after launching a new Observer Research Foundation publication “**India China Relations: The Border Issue and Beyond**” authored by Mohan Guruswamy and Zorawar Daulet Singh.

Saying that China is now India’s single largest trading partner and a big growing export market for Indian goods, Mr. Menon said “for either of us, India or China, to respond to the economic crisis through protectionism, no matter how attractive it would be in the short term, would only hurt our economies”.

After releasing the 217-page volume, Mr. Menon addressed a houseful gathering of China experts and watchers, analysts, commentators and the media at the ORF campus. He described the book as fair, a work of considerable scholarship that deals with a subject that is very topical and of long term strategic significance for India. He said the book is probably the best and the most approachable summary of policy issues that have arisen in independent India’s dealings with the Peoples Republic of China.

“I therefore recommend it wholeheartedly that all of you should read it, enjoy it and not necessarily for the original research that might be in it, but as a policy document because it actually brings together facts that may be we all know in bits and pieces but it brings it together in one place in a form that is accessible and thought provoking,” Mr. Menon said.

Saying that he did not agree with the arguments of the authors on one or two places, Mr. Menon pointed out that “the scholarly material in the book may have been overtaken to some extent by the recent availability of fresh material. The Chinese Foreign Office has now selectively declassified PRC Foreign Office Archives until 1960 and made it available to foreign scholars as well.”

“It is something that I would recommend may be to ORF or to anybody else who is interested that I think we need to go in and look at what is available. There is also a vast trove of material which has become available in Chinese memoirs and indirectly through Soviet and East European archives, much of which I find is being mined by scholars in the West for their purposes, mostly Cold War studies and so on. But there is a lot of material which is incidental to our concerns as well and I am not quite sure how much of that is reflected in the book or used. I am not saying do it now. Maybe another book in the future will come to that,” he remarked.

“The last and really minor grumble is that the book says, I think on page 8 in the acknowledgement somewhere, our attempt is to provide an equal weight to Indian and Chinese perspectives. Whatever happened to the idea of seeking truth or of historical

objectivity, just because there are two sides to an issue, it does not make both equally valid, but that is neither here nor there. As I said before, these are really minor glosses on an outstanding work which should really provoke us to rethink and reexamine the fundamentals of our relationship with China”, Mr. Menon said.

“In a further attempt to provoke that process let me throw a stone or two into the otherwise rather still pond of China studies in India. When you look at India-China relations today, we find ourselves in a global, regional, and a bilateral context, which is vastly different from that which obtained when we began the present process of engagement during the Rajiv Gandhi’s visit of China in 1988. The global context has changed in a fundamental way and not only because of the rise of China, the rise of India today, the distribution of power, particularly economic power, in the world is much flatter than it has been for well over a century. And the global economic crisis, I think, has brought this home very clearly and is provoking a shift in the way that the international community manages its affairs. The relative importance of our region, Asia, and the capacities that India and China bring to bear in the ever expanding areas where we are in contact are also very different from even say 10 years ago. We find ourselves both cooperating and competing at the same time and yet the basic understanding on which the process of improving relations has proceeded since 1988 remains valid, namely while we attempt to resolve our differences such as those on the boundary, we will not allow those differences to prevent engagement in other fields,” he said.

Mr. Menon said “neither side has attempted to change the status quo on the border while we seek a boundary settlement.”

“India-China engagement has also grown very rapidly as a result China is now our single largest trading partner. It is also one of the few growing export markets for our goods. For either of us – India or China – to respond to the economic crisis through protectionism, no matter how attractive in the short term, would only hurt both our economies. As the world has evolved we have also found increasing congruence on global issues like the Doha round, climate change, environment, terrorism. This is not to say that our foreign policies and interests do not rub up against each other. It is only to point out that the relationship has evolved to the point where it is far more nuanced and complicated than the earlier periods which are covered in the first part of the book.”

“If the rise of China is a strategic challenge to India, so is rise of India to China. I therefore agree wholeheartedly with the conclusion of the book and I quote, that “the notion of an existential Sino-Indian conflict predicated on a zero-sum identity of bilateral relations is one that must be challenged and refuted by opinion makers on both sides of the Himalayas,” Mr. Menon said.

“One last word about Indian scholarship on China, to which this book really is an exception. Unfortunately, we Indian scholars of China, and I presume to count myself among them even though I am a bureaucrat, we have never actually lived up to our promise or our potential. One reason I think is because we have followed foreign fashion in China studies, concentrating on topics that are as well or better done by others with

their greater access to the material and familiarity with Chinese language sources and materials. This is why I found this book such a refreshing change. This book studies issues of importance to us in India from an Indian perspective, may it be the first in a long line of such books,” Mr. Menon said.

Chairing the book release event, Mr. M. Rasgotra, President of the ORF Centre for International Relations, said no one single book can sum up China or even sum up a particular issue like the India-China frontier problems. He said for some time now, ORF is engaged in a study of different aspects of China-India relations, China’s relations with other countries of the world, and so on and so forth.

Mr. Rasgotra said another book will be ready shortly, which is prepared jointly with the Calcutta University. He said ORF is also embarking on a sustained study of China itself and what is going on in China in politics, in the party, how politics is helping evolve the society in China, the labour problem, the legal system, security aspects, etc.

Mr. Guruswamy, quoting a stanza from the Bhagvad Gita that read ‘from anger rises infatuation, infatuation you go to confusion of memory, from confusion of memory you go to loss of reason, and from loss of reason you go to complete ruin’, said the book addresses the confusion of memory aspects of the Indo-China border dispute because in the last 50 years we have internalized so much of myths and folklore about these issues involved and we sometimes start believing that.

Guruswamy said he basically came to some conclusions that it was wrong for us to stick to old notions of what is our border and what is not our border. “What we have is a de-facto border and I think the recommendation we made is that the thrust of our diplomacy should be to convert this de facto border into a de jure border.”

Guruswamy said “some of our claims on Aksai Chin are a little dubious and may be, we should put them aside and re-look at this Parliament resolution which binds us to recover it. .... Nobody has been to Aksai Chin. The British at various times said it was part of British India. It was not part of British India. We have also forgotten how this boundary evolved and how the countries evolved. Even in China, they have internalized lot of rubbish.”

So, he said, the book is an attempt to put the works of some Chinese scholars, some Indian scholars and some British scholars together to say that both these two great countries in Asia should sit together and find a solution.