

The MH 370 Tragedy. Deterioration of Relations between China and Malaysia

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There is an irony in this. On the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Malaysia, Sino-Malaysian ties are at their lowest ebb.

In the wake of the MH 370 tragedy, relatives of some of the Chinese passengers on that ill-fated flight, a segment of the Chinese media and a section of the public have chosen to vent their anger against Malaysia. Malaysian leaders and MAS officials have been labelled ‘liars’ and ‘murderers’; Malaysian celebrities with a following in China have been verbally abused; a demonstration has been held outside the Malaysian Embassy in Beijing; and there have been calls to boycott Malaysian products. At the same time, there are Chinese citizens who have come out in defence of Malaysia.

The anger and frustration among relatives of some of the passengers is understandable to a point. 153 of the 227 passengers were Chinese nationals. For some of them the loss of a son or daughter means the end of the family line, given the one-child policy of the last few decades. Besides, Malaysian authorities in the initial days also exacerbated the angst and agony of the relatives through some contradictory statements about the lost airliner. They have also not been able to explain satisfactorily why an “unidentified object” captured on Malaysian military radar in the early hours of the 8th of March — later confirmed as the missing aircraft — did not evoke a prompt response from the Malaysian air force. This is an issue which Chinese relatives have repeatedly raised at MAS briefings in Beijing.

Nonetheless, our shortcomings do not warrant the sort of harsh and aggressive reaction we have been witnessing from some overly emotional and irrational Chinese in the last three weeks. Everything considered, Malaysian authorities have — after some early fumbles — managed the flow of information with as much transparency as possible in an extraordinary situation characterised by an incredible dearth of evidence. They have also offered care and counselling services, financial assistance, hotel accommodation in Malaysian cities and Beijing, and free flights to aggrieved family members, as part of the humanitarian support that typifies Malaysian hospitality.

How Malaysia has been responding to Chinese nationals and others affected by the MH 370 tragedy has to be viewed in the larger context of Malaysia’s bilateral ties with China. Malaysia was not only the first non-communist state in Southeast Asia to recognise China in 1974, it has also consistently refused to be drawn into any military or security arrangement that would directly or indirectly impact adversely upon China. On the question of both the Straits of Melaka and the South China Sea — strategic routes in China’s geopolitical map —

Malaysia has adopted positions which are more benign to China's interests than the approach taken by almost all its other neighbours. There is no denying that over the last 40 years Malaysia has emerged as one of China's most trusted friends.

This is why a lot of Malaysians are deeply disappointed with the hostility and antagonism shown by some sectors of Chinese society towards us in the wake of the MH 370 tragedy.

This deplorable attitude has to be understood against the backdrop of China's conflicts with a number of its neighbours in recent times. Even when there is a certain degree of historical justification for aspects of the Chinese position in some of its conflicts with Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines, there is a tendency on the part of the Chinese to display such self-righteous indignation that it often borders on jingoism. This is true even in the case of its conflict with the Philippines — a conflict which is not as historically rooted nor as multi-dimensional as China's conflict with Japan — where the uncompromising stance of the Chinese on the Spratly Islands has limited the options available to the Philippines. Indeed, on issues of territorial sovereignty pertaining to the South China Sea as a whole, it is partly because of China's unyielding approach that those who dispute its claims have not been able to arrive at some settlement with their giant neighbour to the north.

The Chinese approach to its neighbours raises some disturbing questions about bilateral and multilateral relations. As China wields more economic and political clout, is it also becoming less accommodative of the interests of its neighbours? Is its assertiveness a manifestation of a psychology that privileges its own interests even to the extent of marginalising the well-being of others? Is this some sort of 'Middle Kingdom Complex' that is inherently incapable of according the same degree of rights and respect to the other as it demands for itself?

As someone who for many years has defended the peaceful rise of China as a global power as a positive development that will lead to the emergence of a more equitable multi-polar international order, I feel that it is imperative that China demonstrates greater sensitivity towards its neighbours. It should never be seen as a nation with a narrow, blinkered view of its own interests with little empathy for the honour and dignity of other people, especially those who are its true and tested friends.

The MH 370 tragedy has brought this issue to the fore.

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