

India-China: Reimagining 'New Era of Cooperation' Strategic Imperatives

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Abstract

Given the divergent national interests and complex outstanding issues between India and China, 'one on one' informal summits format adopted by PM Modi and President Xi has definitely contributed towards keeping the bilateral relations on track. The first such summit was held at Wuhan in China on 27-28 April 2018. Its key outcome was putting in place a process of bilateralism to facilitate strategic communication at the highest level and building mutual trust – 'Wuhan Spirit'. The summit also sought to provide 'strategic guidance' to the respective militaries to enhance cooperation for effective border management.

The second summit was held on 11-12 October 2019 at Mamallapuram, with focus on restoration of 'Wuhan Spirit', revamping the process of strategic communication and lending impetus to the mechanism of strategic guidance. President Xi laid down '100 year plan' to rejuvenate the relations between two neighbours, signifying incremental approach to narrow the existing divide. He made six specific proposals seeking both sides to correctly view each other's development and enhance mutual trust.

Relations between Delhi and Beijing transcend bilateral bounds and have strategic significance with far reaching ramifications. Real challenge for the two is to keep contentious issues at bay and yet, enlarge the area of cooperation. Informal dialogue between the top leaders offers an excellent platform

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to this end. While reimagining 'new era of cooperation', India must be forth right in safeguarding its national objectives as Chinese are ardent practitioners of realpolitik.

Introduction

Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping, the two powerful leaders, engaging each other at informal 'one on one' summits to reinvigorate India-China ties has set a new norm of freewheeling dialogue. The venue of first informal summit, held on 27-28 April 2018, was Wuhan; a historical city where unrest to unseat the last imperial.

Qing Dynasty started in 1911. The main outcome of this summit was setting up a process of bilateralism and building mutual trust – 'Wuhan Spirit'. The second informal summit was held after one and half years, on 11-12 October 2019 at Mamallapuram, again a city of historic significance. The thrust was to consolidate upon the gains of the previous summit and explore new avenues of cooperation. The third informal summit is slated to take place in China sometime during next year, for which Mr Xi extended the invite to Mr Modi when the two met during the recently concluded BRICS Summit in Brazil.¹

Given the diverse cultures, divergent national interests and complexities of outstanding issues between the two giant neighbours, innovative format of informal dialogue has certainly contributed towards keeping the bilateral relations on track. The mechanism of strategic guidance and its implementation on the ground by the two sides obviated differences from turning into disputes. As the rising powers, scope of relations between Delhi and Beijing transcends the bilateral bounds as these have strategic significance with far reaching global implications. This article undertakes an in depth review of the Mamallapuram Summit and prospects of reimagining 'new era of cooperation' in the times ahead.

Wuhan to Mamallapuram: Reimagining 'New Era of Cooperation'

Circumstances which led to the Wuhan Summit could be largely attributed to the outcome of strategic review undertaken by

President Xi to further his 'China Dream' (Zhong Meng) which envisions 'prosperous and powerful China'- a 'great modern Socialist Country' by mid of the century.² People's Republic of China (PRC) has always opposed the global security system based on American alliances and partnerships. Beijing is earnestly pursuing its grand design of shaping China centric world order. To this end, China has undertaken series of initiatives to set up alternate multilateral structures including Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Asia Infrastructure Development Bank (AIDB) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

China's future global architecture envisages bipolar world and unipolar Asia. As per Xi's strategic calculus, in the coming decades while China and USA will be the competing powers, India and Japan will be other important players, both in its neighbourhood. Throughout its history, China has coerced her neighbours to acquiesce; it prospered when the emperor was strong and periphery was peaceful. Conducive periphery, therefore, is vital for PRC to pursue its grand design. Hence, passive Japan alongside marginalised India lacking in capability and political will to pose any challenge to China suits Communist leadership. Beijing is also fundamentally opposed to the very idea of 'Indo-Pacific'. It is inimical to Quad (America, Japan, Australia, and India grouping), and at no cost will condescend to the idea gaining currency. In the ancient times, its emperors dealt with the adversaries by pitching 'one barbarian against the other'.³ Doklam stand-off in 2017 also acted as a trigger for China to review its India policy.

From Indian perspective too, definite need was felt to recast China policy in the wake of fast changing global geo political milieu, necessitating rebalancing of relationship. Incremental process and sustained dialogue has been the main feature of engagement between Delhi and Beijing since the past four decades. It is astute diplomatic initiative to leverage 'Modi-Xi' personal chemistry so as to reduce prevailing tension and explore new vistas of cooperation through informal meetings.

Significant outcome of 'Wuhan Summit' was to reset bilateral relations through periodic dialogue between the top leadership and facilitate 'strategic communication' at the highest level. Concurrently, it also sought to provide 'strategic guidance' to the respective militaries, facilitate building mutual trust and understanding, so as

to enhance cooperation for effective management of borders. Agreement to work jointly on an economic project in Afghanistan was an important initiative, which could be a future format for such cooperation in the third country.

The second informal summit was held on 11-12 October 2019 at Mamallapuram, an ancient township which had trade and cultural links with Chinese Guangzhou port city during Pallava - Tang Dynasties, during latter half of first millennium.⁴ Eighteen months period between the two informal summits was buffeted by numerous irritants. Beijing's deepening relations with Islamabad coupled with its statements related to Kashmir, signifying change in its policy, were major dampeners. China continued with routine incursions by the People's Liberation Army (PLA). On trade also, where India has deficit of around US \$ 53 bn, China continued to play hardball.

Mamallapuram Summit, although formally announced at the eleventh hour, was indicative of restoring the 'Wuhan Spirit'. Main focus of the informal dialogue was on consolidation and revamping the process of strategic communication, as also providing impetus to the mechanism of strategic guidance. There was earnest effort on both sides to rebalance the bilateral ties. The contentious issues, like the Jammu and Kashmir and military exercise 'Him Vijay' in Arunachal Pradesh, were off the table. There was a clear message about the intent of two leaders to maintain high level engagement process and, as responsible powers, resolve the existing differences through dialogue.

In consonance with the Chinese sense of time wherein hands of clock tick by centuries and decades, President Xi laid down a '100 year plan' to rejuvenate the relations between the two neighbours. "We must hold the rudder and steer the course of China India relations", stated Xi.⁵ It signified a balanced and incremental approach over a prolonged period to narrow the existing divide and overcome trust deficit. President Xi made six specific proposals which in essence seek both sides to correctly view each other's development and enhance mutual trust to gradually improve understanding from a long term perspective.⁶ While strategic communication will ensure proper handling of sensitive issues, improved exchanges of military and security personnel will dispel doubts. The proposals also suggest increased 'people to people' contact and enhanced cooperation between two countries in the international, regional and multi-lateral forums.

Strategic Imperatives

President Xi ranks among the most powerful world leaders of the day. His squeezing time for informal meetings, in a heavily packed diplomatic calendar, may appear to be a rare phenomenon; yet, there is a sound rationale behind it. Xi has jettisoned the collective leadership model and amended the constitution to become the life-long President.⁷ Therefore, he is well aware that the onus of China's rejuvenation and its emergence as superpower rests entirely on him. In case he fails to succeed, China could plunge into chaos.

PRC's core national objectives are 'stability, sovereignty and modernity'.⁸ While 'stability' implies unchallenged authority of Communist Party of China (CPC), 'sovereignty', besides strategic autonomy, entails unification of all claimed territories with motherland, which includes Taiwan, disputed islands in East and South China Sea besides Arunachal Pradesh (Xizang-South Tibet). 'Modernity' signifies development and economic progress critical to the survival of the Communist regime. Presently, China's main security concerns are internal and Communist leadership is very sensitive regarding developments in Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

Xi realises that hostile India does not augur well for China's peaceful rise. To avoid India pivoting towards US-Japan axis, Beijing may be willing to yield tactical space to Delhi in view of its larger strategic interests. His '100 year' plan seeks to manage contentious issues till China achieves great power status by mid of the century. Xi's approach is in sync with Deng Xiao's philosophy, "what can't be resolved should be left to the next generation".

Therefore, any significant progress on the border dispute is unlikely even in the distant future, more so given the prevailing asymmetry in the power differential due to China's rapid rise. Moreover, its resolution is not in China's interest as it will entail trade off and also erode Beijing's ability to exert pressure on Delhi by escalating tension astride the Line of Actual Control (LAC) at will. Nonetheless, better border management mechanism and robust defence diplomacy will ensure tranquility along the LAC.

To address the issue of India's prevailing trade deficit, President Xi proposed ministerial level economic and trade dialogue mechanism for joint manufacturing, besides alignment of economic

strategies. As China's industry is in the wake of transition to high-tech spectrum by 2025, shift of low-tech manufacturing to India will be in China's interest.

China's strategic culture lays great emphasis on 'configuration of power'.⁹ In Chinese statecraft, nations are either hostile or subordinate. While allies are to be protected at all cost (case in point-Pakistan and North Korea), hostile nations ought to be taught befitting lesson and marginalised. China will continue to deepen its engagement with nations of South Asia to keep India neutralised. BRI is Xi's grand initiative to further China's strategic interests through geo-economics route. It aims to extend China's outreach and gain multiple accesses to Indian Ocean. After all, Beijing cannot stake claim to be a superpower if it remains politically isolated and confined to Western Pacific.

From the Indian perspective, PM Modi has made earnest efforts, since coming to power in 2014, to project India as regional power and vie for greater role in the global affairs. His grand design to make India an important stake holder in Indo-Pacific and engage China on equal terms defies Xi's strategic computation. While strengthening strategic partnership with USA, India has ensured continued engagement with China. Delhi needs to undertake a strategic review of its long term objectives, factoring both global and regional imperatives. Pragmatic China policy is needed to ensure strategic equilibrium in the region. This can be achieved only if India is able to achieve rapid pace of economic growth and scale up 'Comprehensive National Power (CNP)' to narrow down the existing gap vis-à-vis China.

As per former PM of Australia Kevin Rudd, President Xi is a man of extra ordinary intellect with a well-defined world view.¹⁰ He has a clear vision of establishing China centric global order by employing both hard and soft power. Beijing considers South Asia and Indian Ocean as region of immense strategic significance. China has developed close economic and military relations with most of India's neighbours. Beijing seeks to neutralise Delhi politically and diplomatically so that it can pursue its national interests, disregarding India's concerns. Immediately after Mamallapuram Summit, President Xi paid a day long visit to Nepal to upgrade Beijing-Kathmandu ties by pledging to boost economic cooperation and enhancing connectivity. Feasibility study of trans-

Himalayan railway line project linking Xigaze to Kathmandu is expected to commence soon.¹¹

India and China are in different camps, given their divergent visions and conflicting national interests. From series of stand offs over last couple of years including Doklam, Depsang and Demchok, Xi would have realised that Mao's rationale of using force to negotiate with India has out lived its validity. Instead 'soft sell' approach by way of informal summits may offer better option. The real challenge for both sides is to keep the major contentious issues at bay and enlarge the scope of cooperation in the areas of convergence through sustained engagement. While reimagining 'new era of cooperation', India must be forth right in expressing its concerns and not hesitate from taking a tough call in pursuit of its national objectives as Chinese are 'hard-nosed' practitioners of realpolitik.

Endnotes

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³ Henry Kissinger, (2011), *On China*, Allen Lane, Penguin Books, New York, p20.

⁴ Ackerman-Schroeder-Hwa Lo (2008), *Encyclopaedia of World History*, Bukupedia, p392-94. <https://books.google.co.in> accessed on 20 November 2019.

⁵ The Tribune, (13 October 2019), Xi's Six Point Formula to Make Dragon and Elephant Dance Together, Chandigarh.

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Chris Buckley and Steven Myers (11 March 2018), China's Legislatures Bless Xi's Indefinite Rule, New York Times.

⁸ White Paper 'China's National Defence in New Era, (July 2019), Foreign Language Press Beijing. www.xinhuanet.com accessed 20 November 2019.

⁹ Thomas G Mahnken (2011), *Secrecy and Stratagem: Understanding Chinese Strategic Culture*, The Lowy Institute of International Policy, Australia, p 18.

¹⁰ Kevin Rudd, (20 March 2018), What West Doesn't Get About Xi Jinping, New York Times.

¹¹ Wendy Wu (13 October 2019), Xi Jinping Promises to step up Chinese Support for Nepal as two-day visit Concludes, South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com> accessed on 21 November 2019.