

Wuhan Reset – Strategic Etymology Kaleidoscopic View

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M^r Henry Kissinger's seminal book "On China" begins with

Chairman Mao Zedong briefing his top military commanders in October 1962, in the wake of Sino-Indian border standoff.¹ Deep diving into history, he recalled that China and India had fought 'one and half' wars and there were valuable lessons to be drawn from each. The "first war" occurred during Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) when China dispatched troops to support Indian Kingdom against an aggressive rival. After China's intervention, the two countries enjoyed centuries of religious and economic exchanges. The lesson as Mao put it; "China and India were not doomed to perpetual enmity. They could enjoy long period of peace again, but to do so, China had to use force to 'knock' India back to negotiating table." The "half war" Mao referred to was, when Mongol Timurlane sacked Delhi, almost seven hundred years later in 1398, killing over 100,000 prisoners. (Mao reckoned China and Mongolia then were part of same political entity). When ordering offensive against India, Mao instructed his forces to be 'restrained and principled'. Accordingly, after inflicting crushing defeat on Indian forces, People's Liberation Army (PLA) retreated to the original line of control, returning even the captured heavy equipment.²

The singular uniqueness of Chinese leaders lies in invoking strategic principles from millennium old events. No other country can claim to link its ancient classic dictums of strategy to its present statesmanship. This is why; the world often gets China wrong while decoding the mind of its leaders. Even in the recent past, series of incidences that occurred on India's border with China invariably synchronised with important visits. Depsang in April 2013 preceded Chinese Prime Minister (PM) Li Keqiang visit to India, Demchok-Chumar happened in September 2014 when

President Xi was in India and Doklam in June-August coincided with PM Modi's visit to the USA.

President Xi Jinping is known to have deep understanding of Chinese history and seems to follow Mao. As per Mr Kevin Rudd, former Prime Minister of Australia, Xi is a man of extraordinary intellect with well-defined world view.³ Late Mr Lee Kuan Yew had compared Xi with the likes of Nelson Mandela. Therefore, informal summit (*Fei Zhengshi Huitian*) at Wuhan on 27-28 April 2018, at the behest of personal invitation from President Xi Jinping to PM Modi merits in-depth introspection and analysis. It was the second time that Xi made an exception to welcome any leader outside Beijing, first time in 2015 when he hosted Modi at Xian. Xi definitely would not be making such exceptional gestures without a grand design. To unravel the labyrinth of Wuhan reset, it is pertinent to take a kaleidoscopic view of the strategic etymology, particularly from the Chinese perspective and its interpretation to gauge impact on the future course of India-China relations.

Strategic Etymology- Kaleidoscopic View

The circumstances which led to the informal summit at Wuhan can be largely attributed to the strategic review of the global environment by President Xi, in the realm of his recently enunciated doctrine. After assuming power as Fifth Generation Leader, President Xi surprised everybody by grossly bending the constitutional rules followed by his immediate predecessors. During the 19th Party Congress held in October 2017, Xi had his "Thought for New Era Socialism with Chinese Special Characteristics" enshrined in the Constitution.⁴ During the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) in March 2018, he went on to abolish the Presidential term limit, to retain power for life.⁵ Thus, Xi has emerged as the most powerful leader after Mao.

Through its history, China has persuaded neighbours to acquiesce. It prospered only when the Emperor was strong and periphery peaceful. Xi commenced his second term with conviction that China needed strong personalistic leader. Accordingly, he gradually established himself both in the Party and PLA; twin pillars of Chinese power structure. Xi unleashed anti-corruption campaign to clean up the system and purge

potential political rivals. Simultaneously, he initiated radical military reforms to prepare the defence forces for future global role and reinforce Party's hold over the PLA.

During the Party Congress, Xi unfolded his doctrine centred on 'China Dream' (*zhongmeng*); which envisions 'powerful and prosperous China'. It entails rejuvenation (*fuxing*) i.e. restoration of China's past grandeur. To implement his grand vision, Xi outlined twin centenary objectives; People's Republic of China (PRC) to become fully modern economy – achieve social modernisation by 2035 and acquire status of 'great modern socialist country' by middle of the Century.⁶ He also propounded the policy of 'striving for achievements' (*fanfa youwei*) and usher China into the New Era, advocating Beijing's leadership role to shape China-centric global order. This marked a paradigm shift from Deng's strategy of maintaining low profile till China completed its peaceful rise.

Xi has been empowered by the Communist Party of China (CPC) to be at the helm indefinitely, to give him adequate time to complete the process of China's rise as a global power. Besides, Chinese economy is in state of transition from low technology manufacturing to advance digitally enabled products. Further, continuity is considered vital in executing the mega global initiatives like the 'belt-road'. With collective leadership on the backburner, the burden of performance now squarely rests on Xi. His failure could push China into chaos, given the high expectations of China's rising middle class.

China has always opposed global security system based on American military alliances and partnerships. Therefore, China's policy seeks diminution of American influence in the Asia-Pacific region. With US adopting 'pivot to Asia' policy, China accelerated its military modernisation process. In pursuit of the Chinese based world order, Beijing has undertaken series of initiatives to set up alternate multilateral structures to include Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Asia Infrastructure Development Bank (AIDB) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As per Beijing's strategic calculus, in the coming decades, while China and USA will be the competing powers, the other important players will be

India and Japan, both in its neighbourhood. Hostile periphery will not be conducive to China's progress.

China at no cost will condescend to the idea of 'Indo-Pacific' gaining currency and Quad (US, India, Japan and Australia) grouping taking shape of an alliance. Even in the ancient times, its emperors dealt with the adversaries by pitching 'one barbarian against the other'.⁷ To counter Trump's 'America First' policy, China is keen to make Asia as the globalisation pivot. In the larger Pan-Asian sub-set, China views India as one of the important players. Beijing is also re-engaging Tokyo as part of its strategic review. Mr Li Keqiang visited Japan for the trilateral summit which included South Korea in May 2018. The trio strongly voiced for regional comprehensive economic cooperation encompassing ASEAN and other major economies; India, Australia and New Zealand. Sino-Russian relations over the recent years have transformed into strategic partnership.

In view of the aforesaid, Xi apparently has had a serious rethink on Beijing's relations with its important neighbours. Doklam stand-off was also a trigger for China to reconsider its India policy. Xi is going about systematically to challenge America. In the process, Beijing is willing to yield tactical space to serve its larger strategic interests. How can PRC stake its claim to be a superpower; politically isolated and confined to Western Pacific?

From India's perspective, there was an imperative need to recast China policy based on pragmatism through fresh initiatives. PM Modi has established good personal rapport with president Xi. Hence, informal setting offered excellent opportunity to put across India's concerns about the cross border terrorism, Chinese looming presence in India's neighbourhood including India Ocean Region, China-Pak Economic Corridor (CPEC), impasse on the border issue and restoring glaring trade imbalance.

Wuhan Reset: Common Theme – Different Tones

Considerable effort went in by way of ministerial level meetings to set the stage for the Wuhan Summit. The basic rationale behind whole exercise was to build mutual trust and identify common ground to resolve vexed problems. Besides being on same page

on a number of global issues, idea was also to evolve broad framework for strengthening bilateral relations.

Wuhan as a venue, situated on River Yangze in central China was a well-considered choice; given its rich historic past (unrest to unseat the Qing Dynasty started in the military barracks of the city) and to showcase China's industrial prowess. Six meetings in the course of twenty four hours with open ended agenda allowed the two leaders to have a freewheeling dialogue with no pressure on the outcome. Mr Modi highlighted the need to have shared vision, shared thought process, shared resolve, strong relationship and better communications between the two neighbours. He further went on to define his vision of bilateral relationship in the form of five principles i.e. Thought (*Soch*), Contact (*sampark*), Cooperation (*Sahyog*), Determination (*Sankalp*) and Dream (*Sapne*).⁸

In the absence of a joint communiqué, the two sides issued separate statements, with common themes and varying tones.⁹ Salient aspects are summarised below:-

- (a) One significant outcome was agreement between the two leaders to have such summits periodically, facilitating 'strategic communications' at the highest level.
- (b) Second important facet was of providing 'strategic guidance' to the respective militaries to build trust, mutual understanding and enhance cooperation in effective management of the border affairs. There was emphasis by both sides on 'maturity and wisdom' to handle differences; keeping each other's sensitivities, concerns and aspirations in mind.
- (c) With regards to India-China border question, the two leaders expressed support for the work of Special Representatives. They urged for intensification of efforts to seek fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable settlement, while underscoring the importance of 'maintaining peace and tranquility' in all areas of border region. Apparently, it is further building upon the agreement reached in 2005 referred

to as “Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for Settlement of Border Question”.¹⁰

(d) On terrorism, both sides agreed to promote more active regional and international cooperation. They also concurred to join hands in offering innovative and sustainable solutions to global challenges like natural calamities and climate change.

(e) With regards to trade and economy, the areas of emphasis were starkly divergent. While India wanted the trade deficit to be balanced and sustainable, China on the other hand was focussed on investment, by tapping full potential and exploring new areas of cooperation.

(f) Another important outcome was agreement to work jointly on an economic project in Afghanistan. The details are to be worked out through diplomatic channels.

(g) On the issue of strategic autonomy and stability, the two sides were at variation. India’s view on peaceful, stable and balanced relations envisaged creating conditions for the ‘Asian Century’. China sees the two biggest developing economies as a positive factor for global stability. Both sides agreed to continuously enhance mutual trust and carry forward the fine norms enshrined in ‘Five Principles’ of peaceful coexistence.

Prognosis

Wuhan Summit, although termed as an informal meeting between Modi and Xi, was a meticulously planned, deliberately structured and precisely choreographed dialogue with far reaching ramifications. It was aimed to provide the two leaders a platform for ‘heart to heart’ candid exchange of views. Being strategic in nature, the underlying intent was to take holistic perspective of complex issues and explore innovative options for future progress. The thrust was on developing shared understanding, establishing personal rapport and exploring avenues of consensus for establishing effective structures for stable and balanced relations. While the themes of summit were common, the accents of the two sides were at variance, given the divergent perspectives. China’s

political aspirations being global, its post- summit statements were articulated accordingly. Indian approach on the other hand, was more in the regional setting.

China's core national objectives – Stability, Sovereignty and Modernity remain sacrosanct. Stability implies unchallenged authority of the Communist Party. To this end, Chinese leadership remains very sensitive to Tibet and Xinjiang. Sovereignty, besides strategic autonomy entails unification of claimed territories with the motherland which includes Taiwan, island territories in East and South China Sea and South Tibet (*Xizang*-Arunachal Pradesh). Modernity connotes development and economic progress; critical to the very survival of the Communist regime.

President Xi's commitment to the national aims in letter and spirit is evident from the fact that he started his second innings by exhorting the PLA to be combat ready and focus on winning wars. During the closing session of the 13th NPC, Xi vowed to safeguard national sovereignty and not concede an inch of its territory.¹¹ He also issued stern warning to Taiwan against any attempt of separatism. In view of the above, China is unlikely to soften its stand on the border issue or forsake claims on Arunachal Pradesh. Its heavy handed policy on Tibet is there to continue as also pressure on India to keep distance from Dalai Lama. There is likely to be no significant change in Chinese relations with all-weather ally Pakistan. Even on the issues of candidature for the membership of UN Security Council or to be part of Nuclear Supply Group, Chinese are expected to stick to their current position. With the strategic guidance to the respective militaries, the tension on the borders is expected to ease out.

It is in India's larger interest to collaborate with China and manage the differences through dialogue. To ensure continued engagement with Beijing on equal terms, Delhi needs to carry out strategic review of its national aims and objectives on a wider spectrum, factoring both regional and global imperatives. There is need for a pragmatic China policy with thrust on achieving strategic equilibrium between the two neighbours. This can only be achieved if India makes an earnest effort to scale up its 'Comprehensive National Power' and reduce the prevailing yawning gap. This includes both the hard and soft power. Indian

Armed Forces have to adopt a transformational approach in modernisation process to match the PLA which is all set to emerge as modern military at par with the Western Armies by 2035. India has a major geostrategic advantage in the Indo-Pacific region which it needs to leverage through astute diplomacy.

Wuhan Summit was not merely tango between the Dragon and Elephant. It was a well thought through diplomatic initiative to give fresh impetus to the India-China relations in the realm of changing international environment. Informal structure of the meeting provided the two sides to think beyond the stated positions to dismantle existing gridlocks. The new format of 'strategic communication' between the two sides sets a precedence, for more such dialogues to follow.

Chinese leaders have penchant for ancient history and realpolitik approach to address the contentious issues. Xi and his team would definitely take long term view of the Wuhan deliberations to recalibrate strategic calculus in consonance with the 'Grand National Objectives'. On the Indian side, given the reality of 'five year' cycle based strategic culture, post 2019 scenario will be crucial to take Wuhan process forward. This notwithstanding, in the larger national interest, Wuhan format needs to be institutionalised as a platform for strategic dialogue at the highest level, which will go a long way in balancing and stabilising India-China relations.

Endnotes

¹ Henry Kissinger, (2011), *On China*, Allen Lane, Penguin Books, p1-2.

² Ibid.

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⁵ Reuters (15 March 2018) *China's Unspoken Compact Put to Test by Xi Jinping Power Play*.

⁶ China Daily Supplement-Hindustan Times (03 November 2017), New Delhi.

⁷ Op Cit 1, p20.

⁸ Narayan MK, (21 May 2018), *Making Sense of Wuhan Reset*, Hindu.

⁹ MEA Press Release (28 April 2018). Available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/press.release.htm?dtl?29853?indiachina+informal+summit+at+wuhan>. Accessed 15 May 2018, 2pm. Xinhua, (28 April 2018), China India reach broad consensus in informal summit. Available at http://goggleweblight.com/i?u=http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/29/c_137145546.htm & hi+en-IN. Accessed on 15 May 3pm.

¹⁰ Agreement between India and China-2005. Available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl6534/Agreement+between+the+Government+of+the+Republic+India+and+and+the+Government+of+the+Peoples+Republic+of+China+on+the+Political+Parameters+and+Guiding+Principles+for+the+Settlement+of+the+IndiaChina+Boundary+Question>.

¹¹ The Economist (29 March 2018), *Xi Jinping New Side Kicks- The Helmsman Crew*. www.indianexpress.com

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