

Sino-India détente

Making up in the neighbourhood

P RIME Minister Narendra Modi's phone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping on Tuesday should have further energised the process of positive bilateral engagement that began with the Foreign Secretary's visit to Beijing. With more high-level ministerial visits penciled in, both Xi and Modi as practitioners of realism would have realised the limits of a muscular policy. The desire to put more ballast in the relationship after a difficult year is evident from the five common high points of the latest conversation: enhancing high-level exchanges, deepening bilateral ties, strengthening global cooperation, closer developmental partnership, and economic globalisation. The accent of the official accounts is on positive aspects, while leaving out irritants like the South China Sea and border disputes, point to a very cautious attempt to turn the corner in bilateral ties.

Global developments, especially in Washington, had made it imperative for both sides to turn the page. The US is currently focused on India but is sure to turn the trade screws on China, which enjoys a much higher trade surplus than India. Interestingly, in a badly divided domestic polity, the need to improve ties with China enjoys political consensus: a Congress party resolution at its recently concluded 84th plenary session had stressed on the need to “improve communication and trust with China.” Both Modi and Xi will be aware that both sides were harming their future by adopting a confrontational course: the lucrative Indian market remains out of Chinese grasp while India loses the option of harnessing Chinese manufacturing skills for its own development.

Both sides will also be conscious of the fact that at some point, India's connectivity projects and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are luckily just off the drawing board. They could be made to intersect to form a new centre of economic gravity. Since bilateral ties are unlikely to be smooth all the time because both sides have some foundational differences, India will continue to explore alliances with countries with commonality of security concerns. Ties with China are on the mend, but the current times of global uncertainty also necessitate a reaching out to former fast friend Russia.