

Positive Talks

*Modi-Xi informal summit may herald
new India-China understanding*

Both President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi like to reflect on the antiquity of Chinese and Indian civilisations respectively. But that won't necessarily resolve problems between the two countries in the present. More of this approach was evident in the informal summit between the two leaders in Wuhan last week, when Xi took Modi on a guided tour of the Hubei provincial museum storing antiquities. Gains from the trip were not confined, however, to Xi's hospitality, the face-time between the two leaders, or the bonhomie and symbolism on display. There were tangible outcomes as well, which could alleviate some of the stress in the India-China relationship.

The two sides agreed, for example, to undertake a joint economic project in Afghanistan. If such projects do indeed come to fruition – especially in Afghanistan where Pakistan is keen to exorcise any Indian presence – they would work wonders in terms of lowering distrust between New Delhi and Beijing. Also promising is the



“strategic guidance” given by Xi and Modi to their countries’ respective militaries to build trust and predictable engagements in managing the border. If this means heading off future confrontations between the two armed forces, as was witnessed in Doklam last year, it’s indeed welcome.

The tone of the summit was best summed up by Modi’s enunciation of his own five mantras (akin to the 1954 Panchsheel Treaty) – thinking, contact, cooperation, determination and dreams – that he said could define the new India-China relationship. However, in that context it’s worthwhile remembering that the earlier Panchsheel came apart, and that talks and bonhomie have been experienced before only to disappoint later. Xi’s visit to India in 2014 was similarly cordial but also saw incursion of Chinese troops in Ladakh. Plus, mechanisms to resolve the border issue appear to have ground to a halt.

To be sure, special representatives of both countries have been “urged” to intensify their efforts to settle the border issue. But such efforts have been ongoing for decades without result. If the two leaders really wish to think big about the future of the India-China relationship, they must take control of the process and settle the border. After all, an undefined border is the fundamental reason confrontations between the two militaries arise. It makes little sense for the Chinese to claim Arunachal Pradesh now, as they overran and then relinquished it in 1962.