

India-China informal summit successful

The two-day informal summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping of China on April 27-28 at Wuhan in central China has succeeded in the reckoning of both sides. This is apparent from the first comments of the Chinese official media and the Chinese Communist Party media, as well as the first post-meeting observations of foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale.

India has put out that the two countries looked forward to working in the direction of peace, and that they had also agreed to do a joint economic project in Afghanistan, in which context China has been seen as Pakistan's partner. Future informal summits were also spoken of. While Mr Modi threw in the invitation for the next summit in India, Mr Xi said that he

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expected to meet with the Indian leader subsequently too — perhaps giving Mr Modi a soft boost as elections approach in India.

It had been suggested in this space last Thursday that the two leaders' agreement on holding subsequent summits would indicate a positive environment for India-China ties. This has, in fact, turned out to be the case.

From the general comments made by both sides, it appears that they will work to let economics and commerce overtake politics in the foreseeable future. Mr Modi spoke of the economies of India and China together driving economic life in the world in 1,600 of the past 2000 years. Also speaking in the backdrop of the international economy, Mr Xi said cooperation between China and India would be a factor for peace and stability in the world. This is hardly a new formulation.

But its reiteration at the informal summit fell naturally into place in the context of globalisation that President Xi flagged in his reported conversation with Mr Modi. This can be a hint that India and China may desire to work more closely in view of the challenge to the WTO-guided multilateral world trading order that US president Donald Trump appears to be posing by initiating bilateral protectionist steps, in the process hurting both China and India (and others) in varying degrees. We have to see if this signals the effacing of India's vast trade deficit with China because Indian goods and services are denied access to Chinese markets. This could be the new work Beijing and New Delhi will now be called upon to do.

It appears that India's political concerns such as the boundary issue (including Doklam) and Pakistan-inspired terrorism may have been touched upon only peripherally at Wuhan. It was blandly indicated by official quarters that both sides will work to maintain peace and tranquillity on the border, and that they discussed terrorism. There is nothing new there. The proposed joint economic project in Afghanistan of course has an economic and a political dimension, and, in the regional context, may be seen as an alternative theme to India not signing up on China's Belt and Road Initiative.