

When India and China meet

The message from Wuhan is: let us give each other space and rationalise our differences in a grown-up way



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The path of India-China relations is strewn with the ghosts of summits past. The leaders of the two countries have met, expressed the loftiest of sentiments, gone their separate ways. No doubt, summits are good, nobody has a quarrel with them, the media at least loves them. The relationship has often benefited from such meetings.

A note of hope was therefore sounded when Prime Minister Narendra Modi flew into the Chinese city of Wuhan to meet with President Xi Jinping for an “informal” summit last week. The aim, as announced, was to build strategic communication and provide a long-term perspective for what is a complex and adversarial bilateral relationship.

Cautious optimism

For the duration of a day and a half, the leaders of the world’s two most populous countries held talks against a classic Chinese landscape of gardens and lakes, with and without aides. The optics were reassuring and optimism about the outcome of these conversations was implied. Only a year ago, on the high Himalayan plateau of Doklam on the borders of Bhutan, India and China, over-

looking the vital Siliguri Corridor connecting ‘mainland’ India to the Northeastern States, Indian and Chinese troops engaged in a tense stand-off lasting 73 days. The visit of the Dalai Lama, exiled in India for nearly six decades, to Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh engendered deep Chinese resentment. The voluble Indian opposition to China’s flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) being developed in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, was also a source of serious friction. China’s growing inroads in the form of high-profile projects and support for anti-Indian political interests in India’s South Asian neighbourhood fuelled Indian distrust. Hawkish and hypernationalist voices in both countries raised tensions further, and the spectre of armed conflict on a shared but disputed frontier lurked in the shadows.

Last year was an annus horribilis for the India-China relationship. The Wuhan summit signalled that the two countries are working on restoring a much-needed equilibrium in a deeply disturbed relationship. This is a relationship in therapy. For Mr. Modi, whose scorecard on neighbourhood policy has been underwhelming, a detoxifying policy facelift with China is certainly advantageous both in terms of his domestic political image, with the 2019 parliamentary elections drawing near, as well as in improving his global profile.

The outcome statement from the Indian foreign office and from the Prime Minister’s social media



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network speaks about Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi having forged a common understanding in Wuhan on the future direction of India-China relations “built upon mutual respect for each other’s developmental aspirations and prudent management of differences with mutual sensitivity”. These are words that can be variously interpreted. Their distilled essence is: let us give each other space and let us rationalise our opposition to each other and our differences in a grown-up way. The takeaway buzzword from Wuhan appears to be “strategic communication” by both leaderships in order to provide a more cogent sense of purpose and direction that helps heal the relationship.

Two statements

The Indian statement (the separate statement from the Chinese foreign ministry is not so full-bodied) also makes it known that the two leaders have “issued strategic guidance” to their militaries to strengthen communication in order to especially “enhance predictability and effectiveness in the

management of border affairs”. The intention is to prevent incidents in border regions of the Doklam variety, it is presumed. The situation bears watching. There are many pockets along the 3,500 km border between the two countries where the Line of Actual Control is disputed. Transgressions from both sides occur regularly and military establishments, Indian and Chinese, are trained not to yield an inch. Efforts to establish a clearly delineated Line of Actual Control have not succeeded, mainly due to Chinese reluctance. The summit at Wuhan coincided with news that India will build 96 more border outposts along the frontier with China.

The summit has apparently not yielded (and neither was it expected to) any significant reduction of differences on the CPEC. The Indian government can ill-afford to give the impression of any concession on this question to China given the Pakistan factor – a perennial trigger for public hysteria. The announcement that China and India will jointly work on a project (details yet to be announced) in war-torn Afghanistan is a first and unlikely to give Pakistan comfort, although China will no doubt provide undercover assurances to the former that its interests will not be harmed.

A sober prognosis for the future of India-China relations is warranted despite the euphoria of Mr. Modi’s visit to Wuhan. The potential for tension on the Himalayan piedmont is aggravated by the clash of Chinese and Indian ambition in

the maritime environment of the Indo-Pacific. The growing alignment of interest among three democracies – India, the U.S. (now termed an “indispensable” partner) and Japan – is a source for Chinese insecurity, just as China-Pakistan strategic cooperation and China’s inroads in South Asia make India uneasy. Twenty-first century Asia is not a pacific place. It is multi-polar and multi-aligned and a testing ground for the security architectures of the future.

Securing the Asian century

Decades ago, India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, famously said that the challenge between India and China “runs along the spine of Asia”. As India and China re-emerge from the shadows of history, hopes for the so far elusive dream of an Asia united will be centred on the progress and development of these two nations. At the same time, tension or conflict between the two takes away from the prospects of the Asian century that their leaders speak of. Perhaps it is this realisation that prompted the rendezvous in Wuhan. The world should have no quarrel with India and China beating swords into ploughshares. We need a regular pattern of more informal summits between the leaders of the two countries. The challenge across the spine of Asia does no one good.

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