

FIRMING UP TIES

Beijing, New Delhi to benefit from mutual cooperation

The warm reception accorded to Chinese Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's mature stand that India and China can resolve their differences through a dialogue indicate warming of ties after a long frosty phase. Since last year's Doklam standoff, this is the first visit of the General to India. His arrival is viewed as Beijing and New Delhi trying to mend fences. The 73-day tense encounter between the Indian and Chinese troops on a plateau in Bhutan was also a litmus test for PM Modi and his government. By refusing to yield to Chinese demands, India sent a clear message to Beijing that it wouldn't tolerate any threat to its territorial integrity. For a long period, exchanges between the countries at the official level were marked by passive aggressiveness. The situation began to improve with the informal Wuhan summit, when the heads of the two countries decided to bring back dialogue as the bridge between conflicting imperatives. The Doklam impasse had a bruising effect on both countries, even as each tried to outdo the other to emerge victorious for domestic political compulsions. India and China share the longest unmarked border, 3,488 km, and barring Doklam, where not a bullet was fired, and the 1962 Chinese invasion, which was bloody and came at considerable human cost, the region has been peaceful. A disruption at this point doesn't benefit either country. What's currently being witnessed is a rapprochement of sorts. It is believed that General Wei's meeting with Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will take the agenda of their previous meeting in China further. But this bonhomie shouldn't make New Delhi complacent. When ties had just begun improving, the Chinese ambassador to India, Luo Zhaohui's had proposed a trilateral cooperation among China, India and Pakistan, which was promptly shot down by New Delhi. Hence, it's not always easy to predict a Chinese move. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit, PM Modi was categorical in his opposition to China's Belt and Road Initiative since it interferes with India's core concerns of territorial integrity and sovereignty. At the same time, India is engaged in a tremendous balancing act in its quest for multipolarity in the Indo-Pacific region. There is no denying China's economic and military might and its growing clout in the sub-continent and beyond, especially in the Indian Ocean region. Even then, Beijing cannot be making more enemies than it can deal with. The India-US strategic alliance has firmed up, keeping China in mind. The border dispute notwithstanding, India and China have also shown remarkable flexibility while dealing with trade issues. A nuanced approach — not allowing one festering issue to cloud other important matters — is always helpful in restoring normalcy. If Beijing is looking at a durable relationship, it needs to understand and appreciate India's core concerns, and vice versa. If Wei's visit serves the purpose of improving communication between the two militaries at the highest level, it will be a significant improvement in a fraught relationship.