

Modi's 'Mann Ki Baat' with Xi in Wuhan

The information is still not in the public domain as to who first proposed this informal one-on-one meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping. Retaining secrecy without being secret is, after all, part of political diplomacy. Modi's visit to Wuhan to meet Xi, not vice versa, answers this unknown.

Critics in India may perceive this meeting as a self-defeating exercise in image building after challenging China on the Doklam border stand-off and not participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) summit in 2017. Nevertheless, it is important to note that India's image has risen in China as a serious country even though the Chinese military strategic circles are still holding grudge against India for the 73-day-long face-off on the border. To face a Chinese challenge in the wake of the PLA's provocative posture in Doklam was no small accomplishment. What is important here to ask is: will any other country or military afford to dare this with the PLA? Japan has not confronted the PLA despite Beijing's provocations in Senkaku Island. China's militarisation in the South China Sea has also not encouraged the American power with the support of the Southeast Asian countries to confront China regarding the nine-dash line.

The competing India-China interests in securing energy resources and protecting their national interests are bound to collide, coupled with the age-old boundary dispute. India's pluralistic foreign policy under Modi and Xi's "new era" foreign policy have manifested that their national trajectory has a characteristic of being obstructionist towards each other. Taking a stance on BRI and challenging the PLA on Doklam were not to suggest that the Indian Government under Modi did not want good relations with China. In fact, Modi's exposure to China was a long proven experience as the Chief Minister where he successfully invited Chinese companies to invest in Gujarat.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping during an exhibition at Hubei Provincial Museum in Wuhan on Friday

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It needs to be noted in this context that Tokyo is trying to rebuild its relationship with China with Shinzo Abe's new tenure in Japan. Tokyo has even offered "conditional" support to BRI. Even though Australia is part of the Quadrilateral initiative, it needs to be asked: how much anti-China position has the Australian Government taken in practice? Similarly, Donald Trump might engage with China for a trade war, yet the current US Government does not really have a "rebalancing" policy like the preceding Obama administration to contain China in Asia. Why should India then be expected to pursue an anti-China position? Modi's outreach to China by visiting Wuhan, therefore, holds

adequate merit.

A militarily stronger China under Xi could probably afford to ignore and penalise Indian security interests by complicating the border situation at will. Tensions regarding the border or transgressions might still be familiar even after the Wuhan meet. Many would still be sounding cynical that why did Modi complicate the Doklam border stand-off for so long if it had to appease China again by visiting to Wuhan. Well, diplomacy has many colours and characters. Modi's Wuhan visit to have an informal meet with Xi needs to be seen in a context that India has to manage China at many fronts. Having a good relations and trying to reach to China is not a precarious approach.

But it is quixotic to argue that India should not respond to Chinese intimidation the way India responded to China on Doklam stand-off. It is equally important to note here that China too might like to confront India on many issues; but China would also like to cooperate with India simultaneously.

China's foreign policy does factor India as an important partner, though mostly as a "conditional" partner, both for economic diplomacy and for greater global objectives. Xi's 2035 and 2049 envisioned "new era" foreign policy is a long-term one where improving relations with smaller and bigger countries are a priority. It is hard to presume that Beijing would not like to improve

relations with India in a period where it would like its neighbourhood to remain stable for its own rise. Beijing's global foreign policy objective is to sideline American supremacy both in Asia and outside, for which China would require India's partnership. Beijing still needs India's partnership in addressing global governance issues in favour of the emerging economies such as climate change, reforming global financial institutions, etc. Beijing also expects India to promote the chemistry of India-China-Russia (RIC) trilateralism better in Asia-Pacific, both within and outside the architecture of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), especially on connectivity.

This Chinese expectation from India is not far-fetched. India has not been clubbed as an enemy country in the Chinese formulation yet. Rather, Beijing foresees that this is an opportune moment to work on India-China relations when India-US relations have not really improved under Modi and Trump. This encourages China to board India as a possible partner on specific sectors, if not as a full-fledged partner. China would still expect India to reconsider its decision not to support BRI, if not overtly, then covertly. Connectivity is still an open subject for cooperation in India-China relations.

Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) is an important corridor that needs India-China bilateral persuasion for progress. With India becoming a member of the SCO, a number of corridors and pipeline projects in the greater Eurasia region would encourage both sides to discuss and opt for conditional cooperation within and outside the prism of SCO. India is also a part of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB) of BRICS. These banks are currently discussing a number of connectivity and corridor finance projects for which China would like to have India's cooperation at some level.

Also, China is still eyeing India

as a potential neighbouring region to sell its growth model and economic success story. Receiving high dignitaries, hosting gala events and offering grand receptions are part and parcel of Chinese economic diplomacy and its foreign relations strategy. Hosting Modi in Wuhan is with a purpose: to showcase a Wuhan-like model that India might like to emulate. Wuhan represents a classic case of how a city of Hubei province manages to unite the rest of China as a commercial centre and transportation hub. Known as "China's Chicago", Wuhan has road and railway networks to all of China's major cities. Wuhan was briefly China's capital under the KMT in 1927 and was China's wartime capital in 1937. Xi wants to show a historical context in receiving Modi in Wuhan. Though Modi does not need any exposure to either a Chinese city or the Chinese model of growth which he successfully embedded into his "Gujarat model" during his days as Chief Minister, still Modi is finding it hard to nationally replicate his Gujarat model for India, which would provide him an impetus for his national campaign like Make in India.

Therefore, the Wuhan meet may not change everything in India-China relations since identical regional ambitions in Asia put the two countries under a complex competitive periphery today. But this need not be read as New Delhi succumbing to a rising China pressure post-Doklam and Modi's attempt to appease China ahead of the election year 2019. The informal Wuhan meet is happening with concurrent interests at stake both in India and China. This meet is certainly an emblematic one with no joint statement being released. A Modi-Xi "Mann Ki Baat" is bound to have some impact on India-China relations provisionally, if not perpetually.

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