

Wisdom at Wuhan: on the Modi-Xi meeting

For an “[informal summit](#)”, the Wuhan meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping appeared to cover much ground over the two days — in terms of public appearances and in the two statements issued. Most of their conversations were unstructured, at informal events where they were accompanied only by translators. There was just one delegation-level meeting. The statements denoted the wide range of subjects discussed, from bilateral to regional and global challenges. On the bilateral front, they decided to “issue strategic guidance to their militaries to strengthen communication”, essentially to avoid another Doklam-like confrontation. Both sides addressed measures to better balance the ballooning trade deficit of about \$52 billion (of about \$84 billion bilateral trade), mostly by encouraging agricultural and pharmaceutical exports to China. Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi discussed a joint project in Afghanistan. Finally, they attempted to reduce the heat over unresolved issues and so-called “irritants” in the relationship, such as China’s block on India’s NSG membership bid or the UN’s terror designation for Pakistan-based groups, and India’s opposition to the Belt and Road Initiative or its use of the Tibet issue. For this, existing mechanisms of dialogue will be strengthened, not allowing broader bilateral movement to be hit.

Modi, Xi stroll by lake and have a boat ride in Wuhan

Such a conciliatory approach from Delhi and Beijing has been evident over the last few months of preparation for the Wuhan meeting, with both sides turning down the post-Doklam rhetoric. While their previous meetings, in 2015, 2016 and 2017, were preceded or overshadowed by a military standoff or Chinese army intrusion, this time the air has been relatively calm. The message from Wuhan is an overarching one: that despite bilateral and geopolitical differences, India and China can resolve differences peacefully and through prolonged dialogue. Despite hundreds of years of engaging each other, the two neighbours have been to war only once; since the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility was signed in 1993, neither side has fired a weapon along the 3,500-km boundary, which is largely undemarcated. And despite both countries’ atomic weapons arsenals, parleys have never carried even a hint of the nuclear overhang. The Wuhan summit has recommitted India and China to managing bilateral relations in a manner that creates the conditions for the “Asian Century”, and Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi are well-placed to proceed along that path. Much will depend on whether the Wuhan understanding can prevent skirmishes and misunderstandings becoming standoffs, as in the past. The test of that begins now.

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