

## Substance and optics of the Wuhan summit

The recently concluded ‘informal’ summit meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Wuhan was more about optics than substance. That doesn’t take away from the fact that the summit was a much-needed one and has added to the ongoing attempts to bring the bilateral relations between the two Asian giants back on track. Most of all, the Wuhan summit has underlined the necessity of an *entente cordiale* between the two countries, which have become increasingly distrustful of each other. In that sense, Wuhan was about the desire to return to the negotiating table, not about negotiating anything specific. It is, therefore, important to consider the timeline.

### The run-up to Wuhan

India-China relations have been under great stress in recent years. The 2017 military standoff at the Doklam tri-junction and the war of words that followed vitiated a relationship that was already reeling under a great deal of pressure. The Wuhan summit should be viewed in the context of this vitiated atmosphere and a strong desire for stability and rapprochement. Both sides had emerged bruised from the Doklam standoff, and having sold their preferred versions of how the standoff ended for domestic political purposes, the desire to stabilise the relationship was visible since late last year.

In December, the two Foreign Ministers met in New Delhi followed by a meeting between China’s then state councilor [Yang Jiechi and Mr. Modi’s National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval](#), again in New Delhi. Then in February this year, Foreign Secretary [Vijay Gokhale visited China](#). The Wuhan summit was preceded by the [visits of Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj](#) and Defence Minister [Nirmala Sitharaman](#) to China for Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meetings.

These hectic diplomatic activities were accompanied by a clear change of tone in Beijing and New Delhi, reflecting a positive rethink on bilateral ties and a desire to avoid future military standoffs.

### The electoral schedule

Notwithstanding the India-China rapprochement that was achieved in Wuhan, it is important to notice the significance of the timing of the summit. The fact that the meeting had no pre-defined agenda and was called ‘informal’ indicates that it was crucial for domestic political messaging too. Clearly, Mr. Modi needed this meeting more than Mr. Xi did given how the former would need a calm and peaceful India-China border as he leads his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) into the general election. Consider this: India-Pakistan relations are nowhere near normal, India’s neighbourhood policy is in doldrums (despite the recent overtures towards Nepal) and India-China relations have been becoming difficult. While tensions with Pakistan wouldn’t be costly for the BJP from an electoral point of view, a ‘failed China policy’ could potentially be used by the Opposition to take on Mr. Modi in the context of the BJP’s unsuccessful policy towards the neighbourhood. China is unlike India’s other neighbours. It is India’s biggest trading partner, and in many ways unavoidable from an economic and geopolitical point of view. The Wuhan summit — and the warmth and chemistry between the two leaders — also needs to be viewed in this context.

### Outcomes

The summit’s outcomes may have been limited but are very valuable to stabilise the relationship. The most significant outcome pertains to the contested border. In Wuhan, Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi

“underscored the [importance of maintaining peace and tranquility](#) in all areas of the India-China border region... To this end, they issued strategic guidance to their respective militaries to strengthen communication in order to build trust and mutual understanding and enhance predictability and effectiveness in the management of border affairs”, and “directed their militaries to earnestly implement various confidence building measures agreed upon between the two sides”.

This basically means that the two countries have realised that local military activities on the border and tactical factors can have strategic and political implications — and that not everything that happens on the India-China border between the two militaries is politically sanctioned. That border tensions, which often occur without the explicit directives of the central leaderships, can potentially derail the relationship is an important realisation and the two sides should be credited for addressing it.

For sure, this is not a new realisation. In 2013, New Delhi and Beijing signed the border defence cooperation agreement which aimed at maintaining peace along the Line of Actual Control. In 2015, during Mr. Modi's visit to China, the two countries further agreed to “carry out annual visits and exchanges between the two Military Headquarters and neighbouring military commands, endeavour to operationalise the hotline between the two Military Headquarters, expand the exchanges between the border commanders, and establish border personnel meeting points at all sectors of the India-China border areas”. Many of these suggested measures have not yet been implemented, most notably, the hotline between the two military headquarters.

Moreover, lower-level military contacts that have been put in place have not been able to reduce friction, as was evident during Doklam. Given that the two countries recognise the importance of controlling local military standoffs, it is important that they update the 2013 defence cooperation agreement as well as set up the hotline.

Meanwhile, the proposed joint economic project in Afghanistan could be instrumental in mitigating the trust deficit between the two sides. China is acutely aware of the potential Pakistani negative response to India-China cooperation in what Pakistan considers to be its sphere of influence. However, if China can persuade Pakistan to see the utility of India-China (and potentially Pakistan) collaboration in Afghanistan, it could promote trust and cooperation all around. More significantly, if China and India can cooperate in Afghanistan, they can certainly do so in other parts of the neighbourhood. In that sense, then, India, instead of being agitated about Chinese ‘encroachments’ into its traditional sphere of influence, should consider joint India-China projects in the region.

Going forward

Notwithstanding the positive outcome of the Wuhan summit, it must be asked whether the summit has come too late in Mr. Modi's current term as Prime Minister to herald a new beginning between India and China, especially on the border question. China watchers argue that the broad contours of a India-China border agreement have been worked out during the 20 rounds of talks at the Special Representatives level. However, an agreement can only be arrived at a higher political level. While Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi, both with strong domestic political standing, would be able to reach such an agreement, and use it to further consolidate their domestic appeal, will Mr. Modi take that gamble? If not, weren't the ministerial visits that were already taking place and Mr. Modi's upcoming visit to China in June for the SCO summit enough to sustain the thaw? The answer perhaps lies in Mr. Modi's keen eye for the optics and its domestic political utility.

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