

The Wuhan moment

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There was never an expectation that the informal summit between Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) and the Chinese President Xi Jinping at Wuhan in Central China over the weekend would produce major breakthroughs on the multiple contentions dividing Delhi and Beijing. The summit was not about top-down negotiations between the two leaders. The intense but informal engagement in a picturesque setting spread over two days was part of an effort to enhance “strategic communication” between the two rising Asian powers. It has not come a day too soon. Over the last couple of years, it had become increasingly clear that the framework established when Prime Minister [Rajiv Gandhi](#) met Chairman Deng Xiaoping in Beijing at the end of 1988 was breaking down. Their idea that the two sides could significantly expand their bilateral relations while purposefully addressing differences had become unsustainable. Repeated military confrontations on the disputed frontier, growing trade deficit in favour of Beijing, and the deepening divergence on many regional and global issues demanded that the two sides take a deep political breath and start all over again.

That precisely is what Wuhan was about. For nearly a year, Delhi and Beijing have been considering an informal leaders-level dialogue to reduce the current unacceptable levels of mistrust, generate a better appreciation of each other's interests and avoid the escalation of disputes into costly conflicts. At Wuhan, there was no attempt to gloss over a range of widening cracks in the bilateral relationship. A close reading of the separate press statements issued by the two sides revealed the divergent perceptions on all critical issues in the relationship. Whether it was the methodology to prevent the recurrence of Doklam type of incidents, the approach to sustainable bilateral trade, the norms for regional connectivity, relations with third parties like the US and Pakistan, or appropriate ways of countering terrorism, Delhi and Beijing are not on the same page.

But Modi and Xi agreed on one important thing — to keep talking at a moment of great global disruption. The history of international relations suggests that political friction between rising powers is quite common. Such friction becomes quite difficult to manage when the rising powers are neighbours. Modi and Xi recognise this is a very sensitive moment in the evolution of bilateral relationship that has become evermore important for peace, stability and prosperity in Asia and beyond. They acknowledge the need for political maturity and diplomatic skill in putting a very difficult bilateral relationship on an even keel.

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