

Modi-Xi meet: The rebooting of ties is far from complete

The informal summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping, which the Chinese are describing as a milestone in bilateral relations, was all about the big picture. The summit was a pragmatic response to recent changes on the international stage, with the two sides rightly choosing to set aside issues that have bedevilled their relationship in recent months and years to look at ways to reduce tensions and forge greater cooperation. Leaving the talks open-ended and ensuring most of the discussions were held in a one-to-one format would have allowed the two leaders to adopt a more realistic approach without any unnecessary pressures.

Though China's economy is almost five times the size of India's, Mr Xi realises the importance of having India's support for a multipolar world at a time when the US is talking about protectionism and threatening an all-out trade war with China. Mr Modi, on the other hand, understands the importance of a balanced and tension-free relationship with China as India heads towards a general election next year. Thus all the talk from both sides has been all about building on convergences, showing respect for each other's sensitivities and concerns and building an open and participatory world order.

The decision by the two leaders to direct their militaries to strengthen communications to build trust is a reflection of their desire to avert and avoid Doklam-like situations, at least in the short term. The agreement on jointly implementing a development project in Afghanistan signals their willingness to work together in the war-torn country. These are also important signs of their desire to use their political and economic influence to shape developments in the region and around the world. The agreement on having more such informal meetings will give the two sides a platform that can handily be used to address sensitive issues.

But one should not walk away from this summit with the impression that the much-talked rebooting of the bilateral relationship has been completed. Far from it. This meeting was, at best, only the beginning of that process. Differences, and serious ones at that, remain between the two countries. They will need to be managed and controlled through dialogue and more contacts, so that we do not have incidents such as last year's military standoff, which have the potential to throw the relationship off the tracks.

India has given enough indications that it is willing to address China's concerns on issues such as Tibet and the Dalai Lama, and China will have to demonstrate it will not use its "iron brother" ally Pakistan as a factor to needle India.

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