

INDIA'S RESPONSE TO CHINA'S BRI LINKED TO ITS TERRITORIAL CONCERNS

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India has, once again, decided to not participate in China's second Belt and Road Forum (BRF) due on April 25, which is likely to be attended by around 40 heads of government. Not surprisingly, China has expressed its disappointment. Should this be seen as another symptom of the chronic differences the India-China bilateral relationship faces, or is this just a manifestation of China's lack of understanding of India's concerns? Was India's 2018 Wuhan rendezvous with China a mistake? These questions have overshadowed India's China policy debates lately.

The admiration of India's attempt to engage China through the Modi-Xi Wuhan informal meeting has faded away in recent months, prompting some to ask: Did the Wuhan Summit provide India with any tangible outcome? A cursory response to the question seems a no if recent developments are taken into consideration. For instance, for the fourth time in a row, China blocked India's bid to designate the Jaish-e-Mohammad Chief Masood Azhar as a global terrorist at the UNSC, the CPEC is going on regardless of India's stern objections vis-à-vis PoK, and the balance of trade is still hugely in China's favour.

But such criticisms miss two key elements. First, thanks to the overpublicising of the Modi-Xi meeting, the expectation bar was set to an unrealistically high level. The Wuhan meeting was not about resetting India-China relations. It was an initiative to engage each other in a constructive dialogue. Wuhan and subsequent steps were intended to only manage the differences and prevent relations from getting derailed. The popular perception in the Indian media that because of Wuhan, China would not go ahead with the CPEC or support India on Masood Azhar and the belief in the Chinese media that it would lead India to join the BRI, are misinformed at best.

Second, Wuhan was not a stand-alone dialogue, it was deeply embedded with the Doklam standoff. For the two countries, facing an eyeball-to-eyeball situation in Doklam, Wuhan came as an opportunity to re-start the dialogue. It was not a "Bhai-Bhai moment", it was a moment to realise that the two have to co-exist and peacefully so. For India and China, that are dealing with the protracted boundary dispute for the past more than half-a-century, one meeting would not have changed much considering that even more than 20 rounds of dedicated border talks spread over several years did not lead to significant gains.

India's response to the BRF is not linked with the Wuhan spirit. It is deeply rooted in its territorial sovereignty concerns vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. The Chinese investments in Pakistan are complicating the matter with each passing day. India's main concern remains the much-controversial CPEC that passes through the PoK. Seen from that perspective it is clear that India would not have openly supported the BRI or the BRF, even if China had refrained from blocking India's request at the UNSC.

It is clear that China has been selective in addressing India's concerns, and India too has adopted a similar approach. China is mindful of the fact that without India's participation, BRI will remain an incomplete project at best. That is perhaps why China is keen to have another Wuhan-like dialogue. We do need more such meetings but only to facilitate the negotiation processes.

Considering the asymmetry in its relationship with China, India needs to continue its pragmatic and balanced policy of engaging China through dialogues while actively looking for ways to deal with the possible scenarios. The quest to institutionlise the Quad and Indo-Pacific seems to be turning into reality with the restructuring of the MEA's [ASEAN](#) Multilateral Division and the Indian Ocean Region Division into the Indo-Pacific Division. Trilateral dialogues and search for avenues to normalise and improve regular healthy conversations with China are the best way forward.

Self-doubt over peace initiatives or hesitation in moving forward on the Quad are detrimental to India's interests. One should not happen at the cost of the other. A careful balancing of both tracks will contribute to India's stronger positioning in the region.

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