

JOINT MILITARY DRILLS WILL HELP NEIGHBOURHOOD TIES IN INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD

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India and China are capping a year marked by a flurry of high-level contacts with engagements in two diverse and equally important areas. One hundred troops from each side are currently participating in the fortnight-long “Hand in Hand” war game at Chengdu, and by the time the drill is over, external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj and her Chinese counterpart Wang Yi will have held the first meeting of the high-level people-to-people and cultural exchange mechanism in New Delhi. Without a doubt, these contacts have been driven by the informal summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping in Wuhan in April, a meeting that did much to address the tensions that had characterised the relationship in the wake of last year’s military standoff at Doklam near the Sikkim border. Mr Modi and Mr Xi met four times during the course of the year, and both countries appeared to have realised the importance of pulling back from the brink and imparting a semblance of normalcy to their ties. In more recent months, these efforts have been given a further boost by Beijing because of the worsening relationship between China and the US, especially in the field of trade. These efforts have also come at a time when China has faced some pushback in several countries to its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative.

Better relations between New Delhi and Beijing will obviously spell greater stability in India’s immediate neighbourhood and the rest of Asia. The two sides can work jointly to ensure a more multipolar world and even launch joint projects, such as the training of Afghan diplomats that was conducted in October. And peace on the disputed India-China border will help make the process of finding a solution to the issue less complicated.

However, this is not to say that everything is hunky dory in the bilateral relationship. China continues to block the listing of Pakistan-based terrorist Masood Azhar at the United Nations as well as India’s membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. It has also forged ahead with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor despite India’s serious concerns about sovereignty issues. On its part, China has concerns about the Dalai Lama and the other India-based elements of the Tibetan leadership. Without a doubt, most of the contacts in the aftermath of the Wuhan Summit have been aimed at managing bilateral ties and placing them back on an even keel after Doklam. But it would be more fitting if the two sides take forward the much-touted “Wuhan Spirit” to putting in place a template to address the irritants that have bedevilled their relationship.

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