

Wuhan: A tale of extraordinary willpower and realpolitik

The meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Wuhan has been heralded by the media in both countries as a new beginning of India-China relationship that were frosty after the Doklam-stand-off last year. This was the second meeting between the two leaders after the successful disengagement at Doklam, first being at Xiamen during BRICS conference 2017.

The Wuhan 'informal summit' came barely one and half months before the two leaders will meet again, formally, in a multilateral platform of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit in Qingdao. India and Pakistan joined the SCO last year.

There is no doubt that the Wuhan meeting will go down in the annals of history as both leaders showing extraordinary will power and realpolitik for normalising Sino-Indian engagement and realising that any power-play and misadventures hamper the prospects of strategic partnership and benefits therein.

The 'informal meet' must be looked from the prism of domestic considerations as well international strategic gains.

From the Indian perspective, firstly, New Delhi realises that without Beijing's support it would be near difficult to fulfil the goals of entering into coveted Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG), list Azhar Masood as a global terrorist, and can't achieve the long cherished dream of becoming permanent member of Security Council of United Nations.

Secondly, India has also sensed that there is a shift in the neighbourhood towards China. Moreover, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is transforming the regional infrastructure and changing the strategic landscape in South Asia. And India had to engage with the process.

Thirdly, this 'informal summit' is being seen as an attempt to restore the Modi's charismatic and smart diplomacy experienced in first year of his government. The perception that there is a domestic electoral calculus at play in the run up to 2019 has gained traction.

For China, firstly, Beijing too has come to realise that antagonising India further pushes New Delhi to hedging with Japan, US and Australia, forming a Quad alliance to contain Beijing, which severely negates its strategic calculus.

Secondly, China is also feeling the heat of India not being on board of BRI. Beijing understands that a big neighbour and emerging power voicing concerns and opposing the initiative profoundly challenges the purpose of the initiative and can't realise the goal of creating a 'community of shared future'.

Thirdly, international political and regional dynamics are changing. US President Donald Trump's decision to increase tariffs thereby escalating trade war with China certainly squeezes the market for Chinese products and limit the availability of daily products, like soybeans, meats and fruits for Chinese consumers. India has offered help Beijing to lessen the dejection which would also help reduce New Delhi's trade deficit.

In addition, Beijing is all set to play a decisive role in South Asian politics, whether New Delhi likes or not. But for China, if regional environment is less tense and stable, small states of the region will find more conducive to co-operate with Beijing in supporting and engaging with BRI.

Overall, Modi-Xi meet at Wuhan must not be one stopover but the beginning of a new and vigorous partnership to usher in an Asian century.

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