

TIME TO THINK SMALL

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That India's relationship with China is passing through a difficult moment is not hard to see, even amidst the usual hype that surrounds meetings between leaders of the two countries. The rhetoric about India and China changing the world has always masked the persistent structural problems that hobbled their ties. If managing the relationship with China has become the biggest test for Indian foreign policy, the second informal summit between Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) and President Xi Jinping is a good occasion to reflect on the trends in Delhi's diplomacy towards Beijing.

First is the danger of putting form above substance and betting that the higher the level of engagement, the more significant the results. The novelty of the "informal summit" that dazzled everyone when Modi traveled to Wuhan to spend two days in a relaxed setting with Xi last year has worn off. Like so many other mechanisms before it, the informal summit, too, is proving to be inadequate to cope with the range of structural tensions that have enveloped the bilateral relationship — from Kashmir to trade and multilateral challenges.

Since they sought to normalise relations more than three decades ago, when Prime Minister [Rajiv Gandhi](#) traveled to Beijing, the two sides have experimented with different mechanisms to address the basic differences. They started with a dialogue at the level of foreign secretaries in 1988, elevated it to empowered special representatives in 2003, and most recently, the informal summits. None of these have been able to resolve the boundary dispute, trade deficit and China's growing support to Pakistan in Islamabad's contestation with Delhi.

Second, the lack of enough contact at the highest levels is no longer a problem. In the 20th century it was but rare when leaders of India or China traveled to the other country. In the 21st century, the Indian Prime Minister runs often into the PM or President of China and has talks on the margins of such regional and international settings as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Russia-India-China Forum, BRICS and the G-20. Frequency of talks has not improved the ability to resolve the problems facing the relationship.

Third, the current difficulties between India and China are not due to lack of mutual understanding. The problem is the widening gap in the comprehensive national power of the two Asian giants. China's aggregate GDP, now at about \$14 trillion, is nearly five times larger than that of India, hovering at \$2.8 trillion. China's annual defence spending at \$250 billion is four times larger than that of India. More than the size of the spending, China has outpaced India in the much needed modernisation of its armed forces and higher defence organisation.

This power imbalance translates into an unpleasant fact on the diplomatic front. That China is under no pressure to please India. Or, more precisely, it can afford to displease India — whether it is the question of blocking India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group or opposing India's Kashmir move and taking it to the UNSC. That did not change at Wuhan nor will it alter in a big way at Chennai.

Fourth, is the persistent belief in Delhi that current tensions in US-China relations might encourage Beijing to make nice to India. That expectation has turned out to be wrong. The deepening crisis in US-China relations has made little difference to Beijing's approach to Delhi. The movement has apparently been in the opposite direction.

For China, the foremost strategic priority today is to cut a deal with the US. If Xi Jinping can't fix the problem with President Donald Trump in the next year, he would hope that Trump will be defeated in the elections at the end of 2020 and his potential Democrat successor would be a lot easier to deal with in 2021. That the Chinese priority is the US should not be surprising given the scale and intensity of the stakes involved in Beijing's ties with Washington.

Delhi's overestimation of its leverage with Beijing in the triangular relationship with Washington has unfortunately meant India often chose to voluntarily limit its partnership with the US and its allies. That has not led to any strategic appreciation in Beijing of Delhi's restraint or the need for neutrality in the disputes between India and Pakistan. Viewed strictly in terms of power hierarchy, China's strategy does look logical — to keep India in play without giving up on any of its positions of concern for India.

Fifth is the long-standing presumption in Delhi that cooperation with China on global issues will create the conditions for ameliorating bilateral contentions. This turned out to be wrong on three counts. India's support to China on global issues has not led to Beijing's reciprocation on multilateral issues, such as Pakistan's cross-border terrorism, of interest to India, nor has it made it easier to resolve bilateral disputes. Worse still, grand-standing on global issues with Beijing may have made India oblivious to China's rapid regional advance in the Subcontinent and the Indian Ocean.

Finally, if there is one thing that distinguishes Modi's diplomacy from that of his predecessors, it is the appreciation of power and its centrality in international relations. When he took charge as PM, Modi seemed confident about his ability to arrive at some kind of understanding with the Chinese leadership. His expansive engagement with the Chinese during his tenure as the chief minister of Gujarat had warmed him to China.

In the last five years, much water has flowed under the bridge and has probably convinced Modi of the difficulty of persuading Xi to demonstrate any significant flexibility towards India. Delhi's new realism makes it possible to approach the challenge of China without sentimentalism or unrealistic expectations. It should also help prepare India to wrestle intelligently with a China that is in a higher weight class.

Recognising the power imbalance with Beijing should liberate Delhi from the prolonged illusions about strategic parity with China and false hopes about building a new global order with it. That, in turn, should help focus India's effort at Chennai on small and pragmatic steps to narrow differences with China on bilateral issues — especially the boundary dispute, trade deficit and the development of regional infrastructure. Thinking small might offer a long overdue corrective to India's diplomatic tradition of putting the China relationship in a grandiose framework.

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