

# MAKING A FRIEND OF THE NEIGHBOUR

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Mamallapuram on October 11, 2019. | Photo Credit: [PTI](#)

Every government will have to factor in three geopolitical constituents while setting its broader foreign policy trajectory — immediate neighbourhood, extended neighbourhood and great powers. Realistically, an emerging power should stay focussed on building capacities while maintaining good ties with the neighbours, deep engagement with the extended neighbours and balancing between great powers. India's current government has sent mixed signals on this. It has a hostile relationship with Pakistan, but has cultivated strong partnerships with the other neighbouring countries. It has deepened engagement with the extended neighbourhood, which, for India is both a source of energy and a transit to the rest of the world. Though there's a pro-American tilt in its foreign policy, New Delhi has been wary of not disturbing the equilibrium between the great powers and rising great powers.

Of this, relations with Beijing are doubly critical for India as China is both a neighbour and a rising great power. To be sure, there are structural problems in ties — the boundary dispute, the Pakistan factor, and historical mistrust. The conventional understanding of the India-China relationship is centred around these challenges. These factors were more or less at play in the run-up to the second "informal summit" between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping at Mamallapuram on Friday and Saturday. An Indian military exercise in Arunachal Pradesh had irked the Chinese. And China hosted Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan in the same week that Mr. Xi is visiting India. However, India-China ties have hardly been unidimensional. That both leaders went ahead with the planned summit despite the bad optics itself points to their quest to deepen the engagement.

India-China ties have seen a turnaround over the past three decades, since Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 visit to Beijing, to be specific. Since then, the countries have decided to strengthen ties in areas that were not constrained by structural issues. Economy was the chosen field, as in the early 1990s, India, following China's footsteps, started liberalising its economy. Trade ties between the two countries boomed over the years (it touched \$95 billion last year), though it's largely skewed towards China as the latter was fast emerging as an industrial and technological powerhouse. The border has been largely peaceful during this period.

Even when the Chinese and Indian militaries were in a standoff in Doklam at the India-China-Bhutan tri-junction in the Himalayas in 2017, both governments were careful enough not to let the situation spiral out of control. That the Doklam incident was followed by the first informal summit in Wuhan in 2018 between Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi, with an aim of dialling down tensions and rebooting ties, showed how New Delhi and Beijing look at each other. They don't share the antagonism of conventional wisdom. The Mamallapuram summit should be seen against this background.

Arguably, India and China are still in a tactical engagement, not in a strategic partnership. But it's a tactical engagement with depth, not a short-term foreign policy adjustment. The challenge before Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi is to deepen this further, and for that they should not allow strategic glitches dictate terms for a bilateral partnership. In this, they face fresh challenges today. India and China warmed up to each other in a different world. The U.S. and China were in a better relationship. Beijing's focus was entirely on economic development and "peaceful rise". It was also the beginning of the golden age of globalisation and free trade that softened borders

between big trading and investment partners. Now, U.S.-China ties have turned hostile at a time when India is steadily enhancing its strategic partnership with Washington. China under Mr. Xi is also a more assertive and confident power. Both the U.S. and China see India as “a swing power”. Washington wants India to swing to its side and join its Indo-Pacific strategy, the undeclared aim of which is to contain China’s rise. Beijing, obviously, doesn’t want India to swing to the other side. Second, the Pakistan factor looms large over ties. With Mr. Modi’s hyper-nationalist government taking an aggressive approach towards Pakistan and cracking down on Kashmir, Beijing’s Pakistan card is now stronger. Third, the border disputes remain unresolved, and are unlikely to be resolved in the near future.

So it’s a complex relationship, which is what Shivshankar Menon, India’s former National Security Adviser, called “a bivalent relationship”. But it doesn’t mean that China and India are hostile powers or a threat to each other.

There are four constituents in the multidimensional India-China partnership that can take ties to the next level. The avenues of economic cooperation between the two countries are still wide open. China is keen to make investments in India, especially in building infrastructure and fifth generation technology architecture. India, on the other side, wants greater market access in China, and action by Beijing to address the trade imbalance. At the Wuhan summit, both Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi had, in principle, agreed to India-China cooperation in projects in third countries. They could perhaps come up with a plan to take economic ties to the next level, addressing mutual concerns. Take the example of the U.S. and China. In the 1950s and ’60s, the U.S. tried everything it could to weaken and isolate Mao Zedong’s China, a policy that mirrors its approach towards nuclear North Korea now. But it didn’t stop President Nixon from visiting China in 1972 that led to a remarkable turnaround in Sino-American ties.

Second, India and China are pillars of an emerging world order. Both countries see the unilateral world order in decline, and are champions of multilateralism. Security and stability in Asia, which is billed to be the 21st century’s continent, is in the common interests of both countries, and they are already cooperating on global issues like tackling climate change.

Third, China had shown in the recent past that when it comes to deal-making and tackling international pressure, the Pakistan card is negotiable. When India is patient, has the international opinion in its favour, and is cautiously bargaining for China’s action against Pakistan, Beijing has taken U-turns on its “iron friend”. Last year, it agreed to Pakistan being placed on the FATF grey list, after India offered support for China’s vice-chair push at the FATF. Earlier this year, amid mounting international pressure, China removed its technical hold on the declaration of Masood Azhar as an international terrorist. If it’s driven by realism, India should actually engage with Pakistan, which will not only calm down its borders but also weaken China’s Pakistan card. But since it appears impossible with the current government in New Delhi, it’s critical for New Delhi to stay engaged patiently with Beijing on issues related to Pakistan.

Last, and most important, there has to be a doctrinal consensus in India’s foreign policy thinking. Should it compete with China for dominance of Asia or should it stay focussed on its own rise in which competition with China will be a part? India should perhaps learn from both China’s rise and its engagement with the U.S. post Nixon’s visit. For decades, China hid its strength, bid for time. It was building capacities without letting external strains to derail the process. When a mightier U.S. reached out to China, Beijing knew that Washington was trying to exploit the rift within the communist bloc. China played along. Now it’s confidently challenging the U.S., at least in the sphere of the economy. India should also turn the focus to its rise and building capacities, not on conflicts and rivalries. If it’s driven by such a broader but a realist vision, India could expand the avenues of deep tactical engagement with a powerful China. As the saying goes, a

nation can pick its friends, but not its neighbours.

*stanly.johny@thehindu.co.in*

You have reached your limit for free articles this month.

Register to The Hindu for free and get unlimited access for 30 days.

Already have an account ? [Sign in](#)

Sign up for a 30-day free trial. [Sign Up](#)

Find mobile-friendly version of articles from the day's newspaper in one easy-to-read list.

Enjoy reading our articles without intrusion from advertisements.

A select list of articles that match your interests and tastes.

Move smoothly between articles as our pages load instantly.

A one-stop-shop for seeing the latest updates, and managing your preferences.

We brief you on the latest and most important developments, three times a day.

\*Our Digital Subscription plans do not currently include the e-paper ,crossword, iPhone, iPad mobile applications and print. Our plans enhance your reading experience.

*Support quality journalism - [Subscribe to The Hindu Digital](#)*

Please enter a valid email address.

Subscribe to The Hindu now and get unlimited access.

Already have an account? [Sign In](#)

Sign up for a 30-day free trial. [Sign Up](#)

Support The Hindu's new online experience with zero ads.

Already a user? [Sign In](#)

**END**

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com