

XI'S 100-YEAR PROMISE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

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Every prime minister since [Rajiv Gandhi](#) has tried to bridge the trust deficit between India and China first created by the 1962 war. No one has had to do this more than Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) in the era of not just 24x7 television but instant social media coverage. Diplomatic engagement of this sort in these times has perforce to be a spectacle. If the Howdy Modi “walkaround” with United States President Donald Trump was one kind of spectacle, the “talkathon” at Mahabalipuram with Chinese President Xi Jinping was of another kind. However, it would be mistaken and churlish to view these events as mere spectacles. Prime Minister Modi has mastered the art of in-your-face diplomatic engagement not just in the world of new and instant media, but one that is increasingly characterised by a multipolar balance of power.

The 1962 war was caused in part by differences over delineating the border between two newly created republics. It was also occasioned by [Jawaharlal Nehru's](#) hubris and [Mao Zedong's](#) desire to show India its place. Resolving the border issue is key to bridging the trust deficit. However, over the years, two other issues have come up — China's relations with Pakistan and the large deficit in bilateral trade.

Responding to India's closer relations with the US, at a time when US-China relations have deteriorated, China has developed its own risk-mitigation strategy by strengthening its partnership with Pakistan. While India does not appreciate the China-Pakistan nexus, it also recognises the fact that China is not the only country that uses Pakistan to keep India off balance. All major powers have done so, and continue to do so.

If India can warm up to a Trump who is willing to chat up [Imran Khan](#) and flirt with the Taliban, why should it get all shirty with a Xi who does the same? Pakistan offers itself willingly to the highest bidder. No one will help India remove Pakistan from its equation with the world if India itself will not do enough to achieve that objective.

A second factor that added to the trust deficit has been the trade deficit. While India supported China's membership of the World Trade Organisation, it feels China used the multilateral trade regime to acquire access to the Indian market without providing equal access to China's. This is only partly correct. India's inability to export more to China is part of an overall lack of global competitiveness that requires solutions at home. However, by erecting non-tariff barriers in products where India has a competitive edge, China has contributed to a view in India that it seeks to “de-industrialise” India. In contributing to this view, China has politicised an essentially economic issue. The new high-level bilateral economic and trade dialogue agreed to at Mahabalipuram should help bridge this deficit.

India's priority in seeking good relations with China is no different from her interest in seeking good relations with other global powers — to secure a global and regional environment conducive to India's own economic development.

When Chinese interlocutors have sought my explanation for closer US-India relations I have always insisted that India seeks the same level of engagement with the US that China already

has — given the US's more developed business-to-business and people-to-people relations with China.

Despite the trade war, the US still buys more from China than from India. Better US-India government-to-government relations are a more recent phenomenon triggered by China's rise, the challenge of jihadi extremism and the prosperity of Indian Americans in the US. It remains to be seen how invested the US would be in India's long-term rise.

Over the past decade, India has slowly come to terms with the widening power differential with China and is building defences to deal with it. The best defence remains a stronger, more productive and competitive economy built on the foundations of a better educated and skilled people. While India does its homework, stable and predictable relations with China would help. Through the Wuhan and Mahabalipuram conversations, and others that will follow, India seeks precisely this objective.

Many Indian analysts object to China's unhelpful role in India's desire to seek membership of the United Nations Security Council and the Nuclear Suppliers' Group.

But China is not the only major power that likes to keep the door to exclusive clubs closed to aspiring members. As for India's membership of NSG and the nuclear deal, US support was entirely due to President George W Bush Jr who over-ruled naysayers within his own administration and the US Congress to favour India.

If Modi can turn Xi into a friend, like [Manmohan Singh](#) turned Bush around, China too may change its stance. Which is why the new informal format for the Modi-Xi dialogue is important. It is President Bush who wiped out decades of distrust between India and the US.

Can Xi do that for India-China relations? Trust between nations must begin at the very top.

By speaking of a “hundred year plan” for cementing relations between two ancient civilisations, Chinese President Xi Jinping has made two points. First, he situated the current phase within the long history of our civilisational engagement. Second, he made the important point that it would take time for a more balanced relationship to get established between China and India given the extant power differential caused by China's spectacular rise since the beginning of this century.

The next decade is, therefore, crucial for India. It has to regain economic momentum and strengthen its own human and strategic capabilities as a modern, knowledge-based nation. China's power flows precisely from these attributes.

The Modi-Xi engagement must be viewed as part of a multi-polar engagement with all major powers — including the US, European Union, Russia and Japan — aimed at enabling India's resurgence. Given Xi's 100-year perspective, both countries have to learn to live with year-to-year bumps while journeying together towards a new Asian Century.

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