

CHENNAI CONNECT: ON XI-MODI INFORMAL SUMMIT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

Just ahead of the Chennai informal summit between China's President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, senior officials said the purpose of the second meeting of its kind, following the Wuhan summit, was for the leaders to show that they are "getting down to business". Cutting through much of the pomp and show at Mamallapuram, the leaders ensured just that — by putting "business" first. In a decision taken after their talks, the leaders established a "High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue mechanism" between the Finance Ministers with the three-pronged objective of enhancing trade volumes, bridging the massive bilateral trade deficit, and increasing mutual investment in sectors agreed upon. If the mechanism works, it will not only succeed in taking away one of the major irritants in ties but also allow influential stakeholders in the business communities of both countries to promote ties as well as help New Delhi and Beijing work more closely on the multilateral stage. A key test of the bonhomie and trust-building will be seen towards the month-end when the two leaders attend the ASEAN-led summit in Bangkok that is due to announce the conclusion of the 16-nation free trade Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement. India has been reluctant to join it thus far, mostly because of concerns over China's predatory trade policies. Among the key takeaways from the Chennai summit, which added the "Chennai Connect" to the "Wuhan Spirit", was the decision to mark the 70th anniversary, in 2020, of the establishment of India-China relations. The others were to nudge the Special Representatives on the boundary issues to meet soon to add more confidence building measures, to cooperate on fighting terror, and to continue the "informal summit" series, with Mr. Modi attending the next meeting in China next year.

Above all, the leaders decided, as they had in Wuhan, that they would "prudently manage" differences and not allow "differences to become disputes" or as Mr. Xi put it, "dilute cooperation". This is easier said than done as many of the bilateral disputes appear to have an external factor. India often sees China through the prism of its ties with Pakistan, while China looks constantly for an American role in Indian actions. Both the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the U.S.-India joint Indo-Pacific vision have further derailed bilateral trust. It is thus necessary to remove the worry of "third parties" from the room if New Delhi and Beijing are to move beyond laying the foundations of engagement and building atmospherics to actually resolving the serious issues they have in territorial, economic and strategic areas. Only when they see each other as independent and autonomous decision-makers will the leaders realise their vision of an Asian century where the "elephant and dragon" learn to dance.

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