

MODI-XI MEET: A STRATEGIC PLAN TO REBALANCE TIES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

Oct 14, 2019-Monday

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The run-up to the second informal summit between India and China in the seaside temple town of Mamallapuram was anything but propitious. It was marked by angry exchanges between the two countries, mainly over China's perceived support for Pakistan on Kashmir. When President Xi Jinping flew into Chennai on Friday, the expectations of any significant outcomes from the unstructured meeting were certainly not high. While the first day of the two-day summit initially appeared to focus largely on the optics of a televised walk through a 1,400-year-old temple complex by President Xi and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it became clear later in the evening – when the leaders spent more than two-and-a-half hours in a private conversation over dinner – that the two sides were intent on refashioning their relationship that had been returned to an even keel by the first informal summit in Wuhan last year.

It would, however, have been unrealistic to expect that this meeting would lead to the removal of all the irritants that have plagued the relationship in recent months, principal among them being the manner in which China had backed Pakistan's efforts to take the Kashmir issue to various bodies of the United Nations. That the two sides did not raise or discuss the Kashmir issue was an indication that Mr Modi and Mr Xi were looking at consolidating the strategic guidance and communications that had emerged from the Wuhan meeting and helped bridge some of the gaps between the militaries of the two countries. It was in this context that Mr Modi spoke about the "Chennai Connect" opening a new era of cooperation between the two countries after the much-touted "Wuhan Spirit" had imparted new momentum and trust to the bilateral relationship.

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Too much should not be read into a reference in the Indian statement, issued after the meeting, about joint efforts to counter the training, financing and support for terror groups, at least not until China shows it is willing to ask its all-weather ally Pakistan to tackle this issue decisively. Mr Xi's call for developing military-to-military relations to enhance trust and an invitation to the Indian defence minister to visit China, however, are significant. The biggest take-away from the meeting was the creation of the economic and trade dialogue mechanism as it will allow the two sides to tackle a range of issues of concern, from India's ballooning trade deficit to the tricky

negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement. If nothing else, the two leaders have once again provided some strategic guidance that can help both sides rebalance their ties and get down to addressing the more contentious matters.

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