

AFTER MAMALLAPURAM, THE REALITY OF ASYMMETRY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

Describing India-China summits as marking a “new era” in bilateral relations follows a predictable pattern, and both sides are guilty. Rarely have such summits deserved these high sounding labels. There are exceptions. The Vajpayee-Hu Jintao summit in 2003 established the Special Representatives mechanism to seek a political settlement to the boundary issue. China acknowledged Sikkim as part of the Indian Union. The Manmohan Singh-Wen Jiabao summit in 2005 had more significant outcomes. India and China were able to conclude the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question.

This document is important in that it conceded two very important principles from the Indian perspective. One, it accepted that prominent geographical features would be a basis for determining the border. For India this means the Himalayan watershed. Two, there was an acknowledgement that interests of “settled populations” must be taken into account while arriving at a border settlement. This was a code phrase for the status of Tawang which China claims. During Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to India in April 2005, the Chinese side shared official maps showing Sikkim in the same colour wash as the rest of India.

The two leaders, Manmohan Singh and Wen Jiabao, arrived at a consensus on four key points which would henceforth guide India-China relations: one, India is not a threat to China and China is not a threat to India; two, there is enough room in Asia and the world for both a resurgent India and China; three, India-China relations have now acquired a strategic and global dimension and their cooperation is critical to tackling a host of global challenges such as Climate Change; and four, India and China should seek an early settlement of the border issue within this larger perspective so as to better work together on the strategic dimension of their relations.

In private conversations, Wen Jiabao also conveyed to his Indian counterpart that China welcomed a more active participation by India in the United Nations and was not opposed to India’s permanent membership of the UN Security Council.

This positive turn in relations had as its backdrop the deepening relationship between India and the United States and the prospect that these would be further cemented by the proposed India-U.S. civil nuclear deal. India was also emerging as a rapidly growing emerging economy registering GDP growth of 8-9% per annum and globalising its economy further through a slew of trade agreements. It was seen as the next China in terms of commercial and investment opportunities. It was anticipated that India would continue to narrow the gap in GDP terms with China given its faster rate of growth. The phrase, Chindia, reflected this perception. China recognised India’s convening power and leadership role among developing countries, whether on global trade, public health or climate change.

The setting for the second informal summit (October 11-12, 2019) between India and China at Mamallapuram, off Chennai, could not have been more different. India’s \$3-trillion economy looks modest against China’s \$14-trillion. India’s economy has been slowing and is now barely keeping up with China’s 6% growth rate. China does have an interest in the Indian market where its companies have already emerged as major players in the mobile and smartphone market and in the fast expanding digital space — in particular, digital payments and social media. India is the largest market for TikTok, the Chinese owned video sharing platform. India is critical to the global success of 5G, where China’s Huawei is the leader. This is one important leverage India

has and it appears to have persuaded the Chinese to address India's concerns over access to the Chinese market and on the yawning trade deficit. The agreement to set up a high-level ministerial mechanism to deliberate on this issue is an important take-away from the summit.

Like the earlier Wuhan informal summit, Mamallapuram was more of a holding operation, aimed at keeping bilateral relations on an even keel in the aftermath of serious differences threatening to derail them. It was the Doklam stand-off which was defused by Wuhan; at Mamallapuram, "differences" over Jammu and Kashmir and over Indian military exercises in Arunachal Pradesh were prevented from becoming "disputes". Neither summit was expected to address or resolve any of the outstanding issues. But they conveyed the message that the leaders were keen to maintain high level and cordial engagement and dialogue, and project to the world that they are mature enough to manage differences.

China's strategy towards India may be characterised as "neutralisation", that is to inhibit India from pursuing policies inimical to Chinese interests even while accepting no constraint on its own policies which undermine India's interests or are insensitive to India's security concerns. The calculated display of bonhomie and cordiality which accompany such summits do inhibit India from seeking stronger countervailing arrangements with other major powers which could constrain China. China displays no such restraint as was apparent during the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Beijing on the eve of Chinese President Xi Jinping's India visit this month as well as Mr. Xi's visit to Nepal soon after. This is the dynamic unleashed by the power asymmetry between the two countries. The Mamallapuram summit, while a useful and positive development, should not be over-interpreted.

Given the reality of asymmetry, what are the options available to India? In the medium to long term, India can only tackle this asymmetry through a return to sustained and accelerated economic growth which alone can generate resources comparable to China's. India must be seen as shrinking the power gap with China in order to enjoy credibility as a countervailing power. This is the lesson to be drawn from the 2003-2007 experience, when despite the gap in their volumes of GDP, India was growing faster than China and expected to catch up with it or even surpass it. China treated India as a serious contender in geopolitical contention and was more sensitive to India's concerns. This phase began to fade after the global financial and economic crisis of 2007-8, from which China emerged as a more powerful and confident country. India needs to engage in careful and nuanced balancing, seeking closer partnerships with other major powers which share India's concerns over the Chinese penchant for unilateral assertion of its new found power. The upgradation of the Quad, a consultative forum of India, Australia, Japan and the United States, to the ministerial level is a good move. Bringing in Australia into the annual 'Malabar' exercises should be a logical next step. This should be accompanied by a significant transfer of resources to the Indian Navy to enable India to retain its current edge in the Indian Ocean.

Safeguarding its immediate neighbourhood must be India's primary foreign policy focus. And this must translate into more regular and high-level political engagement, a renewed and vigorous push for enhanced physical connectivity and economic integration and leveraging the size of India's economy to become the engine of growth for the entire subcontinent. The perennial problem of poor delivery on projects should no longer be tolerated.

India is the only country which has the potential to match China in comprehensive national power. Realising this potential requires making difficult choices. The current political leadership has the ability to mobilise national opinion to make sacrifices today which may enable a more hopeful future. If India does not wish to live in a China-dominated global order, it must make the difficult choices now.

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