



MODI'S CHINA VISIT: HAS THE ICE MELTED?

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Following a particularly troubling time in the bilateral relationship between India and China, Prime Minister Modi's "ice-breaking" and much anticipated trip to China on April 27-28, 2018 concluded amid positive notes of developing better ties and building mutual trust. During the visit, India and China "agreed to improve communication between their militaries to maintain peace at the border" as part of "informal meetings" between Modi and President Xi Jinping, in which multiple issues of bilateral importance were discussed as the two countries move towards building mutual trust.¹

Before the visit, it had been described as "unusual" due to the apparently informal nature of the meeting rather than conducting a formal summit, while it was also known that there was no anticipated agreement to be signed or a joint statement or press conference.² Clearly then, there were goals already set by both countries that necessitated a different format. As a result, the informal summit meeting has been described as having been "more about optics than substance".³ And perhaps that was the very aim from the start, since following the military stand-off between

¹ "China and India agree to maintain border peace as Modi wraps up visit," *CNBC*, April 28, 2018. <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/04/28/china-india-agree-on-border-peace-as-modi-wraps-up-visit-with-xi.html>

² Ramananda Sengupta, "Five reasons why Prime Minister Modi's visit to China is unusual," *New Indian Express*, April 25, 2018. <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/apr/25/five-reasons-why-prime-minister-modis-visit-to-china-is-unusual-1806041.html>

³ Happymon Jacob, "Substance and optics of the summit," *The Hindu*, April 30, 2018. <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/substance-and-optics-of-the-summit/article23721536.ece>

India and China, trust-building measures, showcasing desire to negotiate and improve ties – rather than carrying out specific talks on any matter – were the order of the day. Modi's visit then was about creating the right atmosphere. And in this, it has been largely successful.

This lack of an agenda has also been seen in India as having domestic political goals – such that Modi and the BJP desire peace with China on the border as they head towards elections, and his government has much to gain from normalizing relations with China. Subsequently, as one analyst has noted, “outcomes may have been limited but are very valuable to stabilize the relationship”, with one significant outcome relating to the contested border, regarding which both leaders have shown commitment to maintain peace and tranquility in the border region.⁴

Meeting President Xi in the central Chinese city of Wuhan for the informal talks, Modi arrived in an atmosphere that was visibly friendly, with grand welcoming ceremonies, performances, visits, and several photo-ops of two leaders who appeared to share similar goals. The idea behind this was that they were under no pressure to come up with major agreements or announcements, but could have candid and one-on-one discussions on important issues such as the border. In this, the meeting was certainly a success.⁵ It comes as no surprise then that Modi's statements on his Twitter account highlighted “productive discussions” and declared that “Strong India-China friendship is beneficial for the people of our nations and the entire world.”

The Foreign Secretary of India, Vijay Gokhale, in highlighting the events of the visit, also noted that the discussions between the two leaders included negotiations on bilateral issues of trade, culture, people-to-people relations, as well as films, and environment. For his part, Modi also expressed desire to host President Xi for a similar round of talks in India, emphasizing the potential global leadership role that the “two major powers” could play, while also proposing a “five point agenda for bilateral ties - common vision, better communication, strong relationship, shared thought process and a shared resolve.”⁶

Prime Minister Modi also tweeted: “The talks with President Xi Jinping focused on diverse areas of India-China cooperation. We discussed ways to give impetus to our economic ties, as well as people-

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nonika Marwaha, “PM, Xi Jinping Commit to Cooperate Further in Area of Counter-Terrorism: Highlights,” *NDTV*, April 28, 2018. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-modi-in-china-live-updates-prime-minister-narendra-modi-and-chinese-president-xi-jinping-to-begin-1844101>

⁶ Ibid.

to-people relations. Other areas we spoke about include agriculture, technology, energy and tourism.”⁷

It is not surprising then that the Wuhan informal summit has been lauded by officials in India. The Ministry of External Affairs in its brief report on the meeting pointed to the belief shared by PM Modi and President Xi, “that the simultaneous emergence of India and China as two large economies and major powers with strategic and decisional autonomy, has implications of regional and global significance.” And this, it reported, will create conditions for “the Asian Century” for which they also highlighted balanced and sustainable trade, border arrangements and information sharing mechanisms, among several other rhetorical suggestions about global peace and security, and the role of China and India in this regard.⁸ Notably, the Ministry of External Affairs also highlighted that the two leaders in the summit “recognized the common threat posed by terrorism, and reiterated their strong condemnation of and resolute opposition to terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.”⁹ While this is an implied and abstract allusion to Pakistan, a clearer point of concern to Pakistan raised by unnamed “official sources” is about an agreement between the PM Modi and President Xi to “undertake a joint India-China economic project in Afghanistan”.¹⁰ No details of such a project have been identified, and it is significant that in the aftermath of the summit between the two leaders, official Chinese sources make no mention of this particular detail.

The meeting thus has been part of a rather grand narrative being built up in India, as the idea is pushed forward that “India and China have decided to reboot efforts to resolve their border row so that they can focus on Asia’s rise in a post-western world.”¹¹ In this regard, building trust is the first step, for which peace and stability at the border is committed to, with concrete steps left for further platforms and institutions - such as Special Representatives from both countries - to decide on. In this narrative, which has been evident in Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale’s comments to the media regarding meeting. For instance, he asserted: “The two leaders were very clear that we have converging interests. We have our respective visions of domestic and foreign policy that we will work together and use strategic communication to ensure that we are able to improve the situation regionally, internationally.”¹²

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ministry of External Affairs Press Release, <http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29853/IndiaChina+Informal+Summit+at+Wuhan>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Nonika Marwaha, “PM, Xi Jinping Commit to Cooperate Further”.

¹¹ Atul Aneja, “Modi, Xi detail measures to resolve border issue,” *The Hindu*, April 29, 2018. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/modi-xi-agree-to-issue-strategic-guidance-to-their-militaries-to-strengthen-communications-foreign-secretary/article23707348.ece>

¹² Ibid.

Correspondingly, the Chinese media and official sources have also reported positively on the meeting. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs for instance notes that “broad consensus on the overarching, long-term and strategic issues of global and bilateral importance” was reached by the two leaders, who discussed changing international landscapes, the need for peace and security, and their roles in this new world. It further highlighted, in quite categorical terms, which is indicative of the friendly atmosphere in which the discussions took place: “Both sides take the view that China and India are neighbors, friends and partners. The development of both China and India is a prevailing trend of history and offers important opportunities to each other. Both China and India stand for an independent policy of peaceful development. Both sides agree that the two countries will continuously enhance mutual trust, carry forward the fine norms enshrined in the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, a stellar example of joint initiatives by the two countries, and blaze a broad path of friendly cooperation between two great neighboring countries, a path that can best meet the needs of the times.”¹³ These are not insignificant words, and suggestive of a future in which despite their bilateral issues, including at the border, and despite Pakistan’s close ties to China, the relationship between India and China may slowly be moving towards looking for common ground. And there is much common ground if commitment is shown by their respective leaders. This is what President Xi and PM Modi appear to have started as a process.

Chinese state-backed media also highlighted how the leaders expected this summit to “open a new chapter in bilateral ties,” lauding them for reaching “many important consensuses” and sending “a positive signal on China-India friendship” to the world.¹⁴ Importantly however, there is no mention of Afghanistan or terrorism in these reports emanating from China. This does not mean though that the summit loses significance for India, the BJP or PM Modi personally.

Finally, despite the overwhelmingly positive response of the media, and the high rhetoric and grand narrative of India-Chinese ties coming from official Indian sources, there has been some criticism of the meeting and its goals, as well as differences in the post-meeting discourses emerging from both countries. One analyst for instance points out that the understandings reached in Wuhan were interpreted differently by India and China - such that India pointed to “strategic guidance” to the militaries to avoid friction on the border in future, which was not mentioned by China’s official statement.¹⁵ I have already noted above that the same is true for mention of Afghanistan and terrorism. As he continues, these differences should not be surprising since “the summit was long on

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Report. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1555656.shtml

¹⁴ “Meeting with Modi to open new chapter in China-India ties: Xi,” *Global Times*, April 28, 2018. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1100028.shtml>

¹⁵ Brahma Chellaney, “India-China summit highlights Modi’s hope vs Xi’s strategy,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, May 1, 2018. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/India-China-summit-highlights-Modi-s-hope-vs-Xi-s-strategy2>

political theater, such as shows of amity, but short on concrete results to fundamentally change the Sino-Indian dynamics".¹⁶ Despite the truth behind this, one must not underestimate such rhetoric and theatrical engagement - especially if that was the aim in the first place..

¹⁶ Ibid.