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Xi-Modi Summit: Testing Their Political Will?

By P. S. Suryanarayana

SYNOPSIS

Chinese President Xi Jinping's latest candid dialogue with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a historical site in India shows that the two wary Asian neighbours are testing their respective political will in the current uncertain global situation.

COMMENTARY

SHARED LEADERSHIP to steer a troubled relationship – this was the message signalled by Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at their second informal meeting at Mahabalipuram in southern India on 11 and 12 October 2019.

Neither leader claimed concrete progress in addressing the 70-year-long Sino-Indian border dispute or Delhi's huge trade deficit with Beijing or China's ballooning support for Pakistan against India over the Kashmir issue. However, the meeting at the historical site near Chennai concluded on a note of goodwill and a promise of stability in Sino-Indian diplomacy.

Re-Set of Sino-Indian Ties at Wuhan

Significantly, the two leaders agreed to hold their third informal meeting in China in 2020. The unique informal meetings, each spread over two days, facilitate candid dialogue between the highest ranking leaders of the two countries.

Xi and Modi met at Wuhan, China, for their first informal meeting in April 2018. Overhanging then was the shadow of a non-lethal but prolonged Sino-Indian military stand-off at Doklam (Dong Lang) in 2017. Doklam is claimed by China and Bhutan, India's strategic partner.

In a re-set of relations at Wuhan, Xi and Modi agreed that differences between China and its south-southwestern neighbour, India, should not be allowed to escalate into disputes. This principle will be tested following the Mahabalipuram meeting, which took place amid spiralling differences over the future of Jammu and Kashmir (JK).

Disputed 'Centrality' of Kashmir Issue

In August 2019, Modi annulled the "temporary" autonomy of JK, a special province under the Indian Constitution. This angered Pakistan, India's western neighbour and China's "all-weather strategic and cooperative partner" since 2015.

JK, originally a princely state under British imperial paramountcy in the Indian subcontinent, acceded to India instead of Pakistan when the two gained independence from Britain in 1947. In subsequent developments, JK got divided between India and Pakistan.

India took the issue to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) which then adopted several resolutions for a plebiscite on the future of entire JK. India and Pakistan accepted those resolutions which were not adopted under the enforceable section of the UN Charter.

In the 1950s numerous differences arose between India and Pakistan over the plebiscite issue. Separately, a brief Sino-Indian border war erupted in 1962. India also opposed Pakistan's act of "ceding" a strategic area in JK to China in 1963 as part of a "temporary" boundary settlement between those two countries.

China's Balancing Act?

India and Pakistan thereafter fought a decisive war in 1971 and signed an agreement at Shimla in 1972. India believes the Shimla accord superseded the UNSC resolutions, but Pakistan disagrees. Delhi, on its part, opposes Pakistan's "occupation" of certain areas in JK, through which the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) now passes.

From August 2019, China intensified its support for Pakistan's opposition to Modi's action of annulling JK's autonomy and 'annexing' the territory. India retaliated by characterising the "so-called" CPEC as an "illegal" Chinese project in "Pakistan-occupied Kashmir".

The atmosphere on the eve of Xi-Modi meeting at Mahabalipuram was surcharged. Xi unsurprisingly referred to Kashmir while briefing Modi on Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's recent visit to Beijing. But, according to the Indian Foreign Secretary, Modi merely "listened" to Xi. The messaging was that Modi did not discuss with Xi India's "internal" matter of Kashmir.

Significantly, Xi had, in his meeting with Khan, recalled China's "unbreakable and rock-solid" friendship with Pakistan and pledged "continue[d] support" for Islamabad's "core interests and major concerns".

Reaching for the Refresh Button

Xi, however, assured Modi at Mahabalipuram that “developing good relations between the two countries is China’s unwavering policy”. China and India “should prudently deal with issues concerning each other’s core interests,” Xi said and called for a “hundred-year plan” for Sino-Indian relations, according to the Chinese version of these talks.

Taken together, Xi’s remarks on India and Pakistan, delivered to their respective leaders at different locations, reveal a new trend in Chinese foreign policy. China will enhance its deep ties with Pakistan, and explore new links with India on a parallel track.

At Mahabalipuram, Xi and Modi now agreed to put in place additional confidence-building measures, based on new technologies, to maintain peace in the disputed Sino-Indian border areas.

A high-level bilateral mechanism for economic and trade dialogue was also agreed upon. India did not rule out signing the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as a founding member. Globally, Xi and Modi agreed to strive for “a rules-based multilateral trading system”.

The ‘Pallava’ Pathway

Coastal Mahabalipuram in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu was chosen as the venue for Xi-Modi talks because of southern and eastern India’s ancient maritime-trade and philosophical links with Southeast Asia and China. According to a Chinese diplomat-scholar, Jiang Yili, the Buddhist philosophy of Nagarjuna (of India’s Andhra region) had deeply influenced China.

As for India-China connectivity in today’s globalised world, Xi now briefed Modi of a growing “need” to “create a more unobstructed regional connectivity network”. This was perhaps Xi’s way of expressing displeasure over India’s opposition to the CPEC.

Modi, on his part, hailed the existing “Wuhan Spirit” and the potential “Chennai Connect” as the new drivers of India-China relations. Implied is the possibility of Sino-Indian connectivity projects. But concrete actions, not colourful phrases, will power productive diplomacy by either side.

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