Substance and optics of the summit

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has a short window to build on the positive outcomes of the Wuhan meeting

**T**he recently concluded ‘infor­mal' summit meeting bet­ween Prime Minister Naren- dra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Wuhan was more about optics than substance. That doesn't take away from the fact that the summit was a much-need­ed one and has added to the ongo­ing attempts to bring the bilateral relations between the two Asian giants back on track. Most of all, the Wuhan summit has underlined the necessity of an *entente cordiale* between the two countries, which have become increasingly distrust­ful of each other. In that sense, Wuhan was about the desire to re­turn to the negotiating table, not about negotiating anything specif­ic. It is, therefore, important to consider the timeline.

The run-up to Wuhan

India-China relations have been under great stress in recent years. The 2017 military standoff at the Doklam tri-junction and the war of words that followed vitiated a rela­tionship that was already reeling under a great deal of pressure. The Wuhan summit should be viewed in the context of this vitiated at­mosphere and a strong desire for stability and rapprochement. Both sides had emerged bruised from the Doklam standoff, and having sold their preferred versions of how the standoff ended for dom­estic political purposes, the desire to stabilise the relationship was visible since late last year.

In December, the two Foreign Ministers met in New Delhi fol­lowed by a meeting between Chi­na's then state councilor Yang Jie- chi and Mr. Modi's National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval, again in New Delhi. Then in February this year, Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale visited China. The Wuhan summit was preceded by the visits of Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj and Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to China for Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meetings.

These hectic diplomatic activi­ties were accompanied by a clear change of tone in Beijing and New Delhi, reflecting a positive rethink on bilateral ties and a desire to avoid future military standoffs.The electoral schedule der between the two militaries is politically sanctioned. That border tensions, which often occur with­out the explicit directives of the central leaderships, can potential­ly derail the relationship is an im­portant realisation and the two sides should be credited for ad­dressing it.

For sure, this is not a new reali­sation. In 2013, New Delhi and Beijing signed the border defence cooperation agreement which aimed at maintaining peace along the Line of Actual Control. In 2015, during Mr. Modi's visit to China, the two countries further agreed to “carry out annual visits and ex­changes between the two Military Headquarters and neighbouring military commands, endeavour to operationalise the hotline bet­ween the two Military Headquar­ters, expand the exchanges bet­ween the border commanders, and establish border personnel meeting points at all sectors of the India-China border areas”. Many of these suggested measures have not yet been implemented, most notably, the hotline between the two military headquarters.

Moreover, lower-level military contacts that have been put in place have not been able to reduce friction, as was evident during Doklam. Given that the two coun­tries recognise the importance of controlling local military stan­doffs, it is important that they up­date the 2013 defence cooperation agreement as well as set up the hotline. Notwithstanding the positive out­come of the Wuhan summit, it must be asked whether the sum­mit has come too late in Mr. Modi's current term as Prime Minister to herald a new beginning between India and China, especially on the border question. China watchers argue that the broad contours of a India-China border agreement have been worked out during the 20 rounds of talks at the Special Representatives level. However, an agreement can only be arrived at a higher political level. While Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi, both with strong domestic political standing, would be able to reach such an agree­ment, and use it to further consoli­date their domestic appeal, will Mr. Modi take that gamble? If not, weren't the ministerial visits that were already taking place and Mr. Modi's upcoming visit to China in June for the SCO summit enough to sustain the thaw? The answer perhaps lies in Mr. Modi's keen eye for the optics and its domestic pol­itical utility.

1. [**optics**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/optics) (noun) – (typically in a political situation) the way in which an event is recognized by the public.
2. [**substance**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/substance) (noun) – significant subject, important matter/content, valid message.
3. [**window**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/window) (noun) – opportunity, chance, right moment.
4. [**take away from**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/take_away_from) (phrasal verb) – detract, reduce/lessen, devalue.
5. [**underline**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/underline) (verb) – underscore, emphasize, highlight.
6. [**entente cordiale**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/entente) (noun) – French; (friendly) understanding.
7. [**run-up**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/run-up) to (noun) – a period/time before an important event.
8. [**standoff**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/standoff) (noun) – deadlock, stalemate, impasse.
9. [**vitiate**](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/vitiate) (verb) – spoil, impair, destroy.
10. [**reel**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/reel) under (verb) – stagger, stumble, feel shocked.
11. [**rapprochement**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/rapprochement) (noun) – reconciliation, agreement, cooperation.
12. [**bruise**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/bruise) (verb) – inflict, hurt/injure, distress.
13. [**precede**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/precede) (verb) – come/go before, pave the way for, lead to.
14. [**notwithstanding**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/notwithstanding) (preposition) – in spite of, despite, regardless of.
15. [**doldrums**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/doldrums) (noun) – a state or period of inactivity, stagnation, sluggish.
16. [**overture**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/overture) (noun) – conciliatory move, approach, signal/proposal.
17. [**pertain**](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/pertain?q=pertain+) (verb) – concern, relate to, be connected with.
18. [**tranquility**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/tranquillity) (noun) – peacefulness, placidity, serenity.
19. [**earnestly**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/earnestly) (adverb) – seriously, sincerely, resolutely/firmly.
20. [**explicit**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/explicit) (adjective) – clear/direct, obvious, straightforward.
21. [**derail**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/derail) (verb) – obstruct, impede, hinder.
22. [**hotline**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/hotline) (noun) – a direct telephone line between two head quarters of government for emergency & or communication.
23. put in place (phrase) – initiate, usher in, bring in.
24. [**friction**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/friction) (noun) – discord, conflict, disagreement.
25. [**mitigate**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mitigate) (verb) – reduce, weaken, diminish.
26. [**sphere of influence**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sphere_of_influence_%28or_interest%29) (noun) – domain, area, territory of a country under another country’s informal influence.
27. [**herald**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/herald) (verb) – signal, indicate, announce/usher in.
28. [**contour**](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/contour?q=contours) (noun) – outline, shape, form.
29. [**consolidate**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/consolidate) (verb) – strengthen, secure, reinforce/fortify.
30. [**thaw**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/thaw) (noun) – an increase in friendliness.
31. [**utility**](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/utility) (noun) – usefulness, advantage, benefit.

Meanwhile, the proposed joint economic project in Afghanistan could be instrumental in mitigat­ing the trust deficit between the two sides. China is acutely aware of the potential Pakistani negative response to India-China coopera­tion in what Pakistan considers to be its sphere of influence. Howev- er, if China can persuade Pakistan to see the utility of India-China (and potentially Pakistan) collabo­ration in Afghanistan, it could pro­mote trust and cooperation all around. More significantly, if Chi­na and India can cooperate in Af­ghanistan, they can certainly do so in other parts of the neighbour­hood. In that sense, then, India, instead of being agitated about Chinese ‘encroachments' into its traditional sphere of influence, should consider joint India-China projects in the region.

Going forward

Notwithstanding the India-China rapprochement that was achieved in Wuhan, it is important to notice the significance of the timing of the summit. The fact that the meeting had no pre-defined agen­da and was called ‘informal' indi­cates that it was crucial for domes­tic political messaging too. Clearly, Mr. Modi needed this meeting more than Mr. Xi did given how the former would need a calm and peaceful India-China border as he leads his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) into the general election. Consider this: India-Pakistan rela­tions are nowhere near normal, India's neighbourhood policy is in doldrums (despite the recent over­tures towards Nepal) and India- China relations have been becom­ing difficult. While tensions with Pakistan wouldn't be costly for the BJP from an electoral point of view, a ‘failed China policy' could potentially be used by the Opposi­tion to take on Mr. Modi in the con­text of the BJP's unsuccessful poli­cy towards the neighbourhood. China is unlike India's other neigh-bours. It is India's biggest trading partner, and in many ways un­avoidable from an economic and geopolitical point of view. The Wu­han summit — and the warmth and chemistry between the two lead­ers — also needs to be viewed in this context.

Outcomes

The summit's outcomes may have been limited but are very valuable to stabilise the relationship. The most significant outcome pertains to the contested border. In Wu­han, Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi “under­scored the importance of main­taining peace and tranquility in all areas of the India-China border re­gion... To this end, they issued strategic guidance to their respec­tive militaries to strengthen com­munication in order to build trust and mutual understanding and en­hance predictability and effective­ness in the management of border affairs”, and “directed their mili­taries to earnestly implement va­rious confidence building mea­sures agreed upon between the two sides”.

This basically means that the two countries have realised that local military activities on the bor­der and tactical factors can have