

Mammallapuram Summit Is The Start Of A New Era In India-China Relations

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Introduction

Even as the mindscapes of many strategic analysts are deciphering the just-concluded, top-class diplomatic blitzkrieg of PM Modi at “Howdy Modi” with Trump in tow and “the full Jaishankar” in the US, the countdown to another high voltage, high stakes diplomatic encounter has already begun. The world will now be witnessing a grand, media spectacle- the second “informal” summit between Modi and China’s supreme leader Xi Jinping on October 11-12 in Mammallapuram, near Chennai, also a site symbolizing their civilization and historic linkages. Similar to the first summit held in Wuhan, China on April 27-28 last year, this summit too will be enmeshed with deep, long personal conversations between the two without any pre-scripted agenda and outcomes. That these two leaders are meeting again in this format-an original, innovative contribution to global diplomatic practice by the two- signals most importantly that both see this informal summitry based purely on personal chemistry as the best diplomatic track to “manage” the bilateral relationship. In Indian eyes, both leaders saw Wuhan as an “opportunity for direct, free and candid exchange of views offered by the Informal Summit and agreed on the utility of holding more such dialogues in the future” as “the forward-looking dialogue raised the level of strategic communication about the perspective, priorities and vision that guide their respective policy choices domestically, regionally and globally. The Wuhan summit constituted “strategic communication” at the highest levels with around 10 hours of conversations between the two leaders on three broad themes: domestic developments and direction of each country; how each country viewed the world and recent global and international developments; and the state of the India-China bilateral relationship. Emerging from the Doklam standoff, both “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.” The Mammallapuram Summit

led to the much talked about Wuhan spirit embodying the consensus that top leaders have “reset” the direction of the relationship. Another substantive outcome too was the China-India plus model, a forward movement on the BRI that India has objected to since its inception on grounds of violating its sovereignty pointing to CPEC. In fact, alluding to Wuhan Summit creating “a new equilibrium”, Jaishankar has been repeatedly stating that both leaders did markedly agree to “prevent their differences from turning into disputes.” The period following Wuhan saw a better, faster communication that prevented border skirmishes and scores of regular, cordial bilateral meetings of Modi and Jinping at the side-lines of many multilateral events. The road to the Mammallapuram Summit, however, has already entered choppy waters after the Indian decision to abrogate Article 370 related to Jammu and Kashmir. Besides terming this Indian action as undermining its sovereignty, China went ahead to solidly backing the Pakistani assertions on Kashmir and helping it hold informal consultations in the UN Security Council and mentioning Kashmir in its UN General Assembly address. In fact, this came immediately after Jaishankar’s visit to Beijing in August explaining the Indian decision as entirely an internal matter with “no implication for the external boundaries of India or the LAC with China.” This has now been followed by the very recent Chinese objections to India’s ongoing Him-Vijay military exercises in Arunachal Pradesh. These ruffled weathers have been amply reflected in the lack of official announcement of the Summit itself and the itinerary details in addition to the fact that Jinping will be in India for less than 24 hours unlike the much longer Wuhan Summit. These differences, however, are symptomatic of the competing, alternative visions of global order each side is aiming to build and strengthen. India is battling for a political and security order in Asia which is multi-polar and democratic that is reflected in its support for an open and free Indo-Pacific in total opposition to a unipolar Asia that China desires and sees it as its own manifest destiny. At the same time though, India and China are on the same page in building a global economic order that is more open, pluralist, multi-polar and participative. The public bonhomie between Modi and Trump witnessed by the world at the Houston rally and the bilateral meeting later last month in the US has further strengthened Indian hand in its dealings with other powers including China. India also did away with Chinese apprehensions of Quad and joined the upgraded Foreign Ministers level meeting held in New York on the side-lines of the UN General Assembly session. China, on the other hand, is coming to the Summit with a relatively “weak” position now. Besides many serious concerns about a domestic economic slowdown, it is in the midst of a full-fledged trade war with the US triggered by President Trump’s America First. This is in addition to the growing consensus in Washington and other alliance capitals that

China is a “revisionist” power challenging its hegemony in the Indo-Pacific and beyond and must be resisted comprehensively. Adding to these are the powerful visuals around the globe of the public protests in Hong Kong challenging the grip of the Communist party leadership on the island city. Jinping’s pet dream BRI is also increasingly under review by many participant countries coupled with many other powers like the EU joining hands in rolling out their own alternatives to the BRI. In this strategic state wherein India and China find themselves, Modi should renew his diplomatic focus and efforts at the Summit at four levels. First, he should seek “early harvest” of the on-going boundary talks between the Special Representatives coupled with continued “peace and tranquillity” at the LAC as envisioned in the 1993 and 1996 agreements and the Wuhan talks. Secondly, India needs to suggest ways and means to prevent Pakistan from intruding in its relationship with China by sensitizing it to shared concerns of terrorism and its negative consequences for their own bilateral terrain. Thirdly, both need to identify roadmaps to bring in complementarities into play in their bilateral trade to address the burgeoning trade deficit favouring China. Finally, the importance of people to people contacts cannot be emphasized more in creating a better, informed understanding of each other. There are now around 20000 Indian students studying in China which is a positive trend that must be built upon. Despite being besieged by a host of current irritants and fundamental, strategic divergences, India and China both should see the Mammallapuram Summit as a historic, transformative diplomatic opportunity to move beyond the management of their relationship to “actively reshaping” their civilizational future.

Modi-Jinping Mammallapuram Summit: Transforming India-China relations?

The optics of the second Sino-Indian informal summit held at the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site Mammallapuram in Tamil Nadu was great. Chinese President Xi was given a warm welcome by Prime Minister Modi and taken on a tour of the stunning rock cut 7th century shore temples of Mammallapuram, depicting the scenes from the Mahabharata. Modi also presented President Xi a Kanjeevaram silk cloth bearing Xi’s portrait. President Xi said that he was ‘overwhelmed’ by the warmth and hospitality of the host. Prime Minister Modi described the second informal summit as a continuation of the Wuhan spirit, a reference to the first informal summit that was held in Wuhan, China in April 2018. He said that the Mammallapuram summit will take forward the momentum in Sino-Indian relations which was built after Wuhan meeting. In his characteristic manner, Modi coined the phrase “Chennai connect” to describe the start of a ‘new chapter’ in Sino-Indian relation after the second informal

summit. Holding informal summits at beautiful locations is an innovation in Sino-Indian relations. A lot of goodwill is generated when two leaders meet in informal settings to discuss complex issues without any prior agenda. Without going into the nitty-gritty of complex matters, the leaders are able to get an overview of the relationship and provide guidance to the officials about future directions. Such summits undoubtedly lower the temperature. In the weeks preceding the summit, the relationship had been stressed particularly after India abrogated Article 370 of its Constitution. The Chinese took strong exception and described the Indian action as undermining China's sovereignty. They helped organise an informal closed-door meeting at the UN Security Council on Pakistan's request to discuss the India's Kashmir action. They issued strongly worded statements on Kashmir echoing the positions taken by their all-weather friend Pakistan. Prime Minister Modi in his UN General Assembly (UNGA) address avoided any mention of Kashmir but the Indian foreign ministry issued appropriately worded statements countering China's positions on Kashmir. The Indian External Affairs Minister, during his visit to Beijing in August, clarified the Indian position and sought to reassure the Chinese side that the Indian action did not mean any change in India's position on the boundary question. That did not prevent the Chinese from making references to the UN Security Council resolutions in their statements as well as in the Sino-Pakistan joint press release issued on the conclusion of Pakistan Prime Minister Khan's visit to Beijing a few days before the Mammallapuram summit. An excellent ambience was created at Mammallapuram that must have helped in calming the situation that threatened to go out of control on account of Kashmir related statements. But, what did the summit achieve in terms of relation to the outstanding problems? The Indian Foreign Secretary, in his press conference, summed up the results of the summit. He identified six main areas which the two leaders discussed: trade, people-to-people connect, tourism, defence and security, climate change, terrorism and the threat of radicalization. He noted that the two sides had managed to avoid any disruptions in the bilateral relationship and take it forward. Trade was perhaps the most important issue discussed at the summit. The major take away from the summit was that the two sides have agreed to set up yet another mechanism, this time at the levels of the finance ministers, to look at trade and investments issues in a holistic fashion. It will be recalled that India and China already have a strategic economic dialogue at the level of Niti Ayog and National Development Council of China to look into these matters. The ambit of discussions will be widened in the new mechanism that has been announced. Significantly, Kashmir was neither raised nor discussed. This was a wise move. Discussing Kashmir would have only accentuated the differences and derailed the summit. On the boundary question, it was agreed that

the Special Representatives will continue with their discussions. Clearly this is one of those intractable issues on which the two sides do not have a common view on its resolution. No new confidence building measures to maintain peace and integrity of the border were announced. It was however, decided that the Indian Defence Minister will visit China in due course. The nitty-gritty of border management, joint military exercises et cetera will most likely be discussed during that visit. The Mammallapuram summit should be assessed not just for what it achieved on the hard issues but also for highlighting the soft tissues. People may not remember the details of the discussions at Mammallapuram but they will not forget the stunning visuals of the shore temples of Mammallapuram. It is becoming increasingly clear that the importance of soft power in India's diplomacy is growing by the day. Prime Minister Modi has been at the forefront of showing India's culture and civilization to the visiting leaders. The Mammallapuram summit was all about India showcasing its considerable soft power. Mammallapuram, a UNESCO World Heritage, brings into relief the ancient China-India civilizational contacts dating back to several centuries. The Pallava Kings who ruled Mammallapuram circa the seventh-eighth centuries used to have trade connections with what is now the Fujian province of China. Archaeological findings show that Tamil traders had possibly built a temple there. The summit has evoked a great deal of interest in researching and documenting ancient civilizational contacts between India's southern states and China. Notwithstanding the hard problems of Sino-Indian relations, people-to-people contacts are becoming an important factor in bilateral relations. Mammallapuram summit will help the two sides to bring the public into the Sino-Indian relations in a big way. A series of activities leading up to the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations next year are lined up to make Indian and Chinese public more aware of their historical relations. The two sides also seem to have discussed how to exploit the enormous tourism potential. That will yield a lot of economic benefit also. Clearly, neither side came to the summit with the expectation of any major breakthroughs. None was achieved. It was merely decided that the discussions will continue at various levels to maintain the momentum in bilateral ties generated after the Wuhan summit. The informal summit process which began at Wuhan to contain the fall out of the Doklam crisis will continue in future as well. Prime Minister Modi has been invited to visit China for the next informal summit. But there is also a risk that frequent informal summits may undermine the formal negotiating channels which are indispensable for any bilateral relationship to go forward. The massive churn in the global environment impacts both countries deeply. They are competing with each other for their place in the world. Just as India is watching China's moves such as the China Pakistan Economic Corridor and its growing

influence in the neighbourhood and the Chinese inroads into the Indian Ocean, China is also observing with some concern the growing closeness between India and the United States. India has upgraded its participation in the quadrilateral group of countries (QUAD) which will unnerve China. The two countries also have a separate channel of interaction on the multilateral floor such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Russia-India-China trilateral, BRICS and G-20. India is also negotiating with China and other countries a giant free trade agreement Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement. If concluded, RCEP will tantamount to a free trade agreement between India and China. The China-India relationship has become multidimensional. Although the core issues between the two countries remain, other issues are also gaining importance. Both sides need to approach the relationship with extreme caution and care. The two leaders, already having met 18 times since 2014, are interested in enhancing mutual understanding of these changes. They do not want the bilateral relationship to be derailed by the difficult issues. As Mr Modi observed at the delegation level talks, Mammallapuram summit is a step towards 'managing' the relationship and building trust and not letting differences become disputes. Neither side seems to be in a mood to take up the difficult questions at this stage to avoid derailing the relationship. That seems to be the message coming from Mammallapuram. The difficult issues like the boundary question can await resolution. The second informal summit kept the focus on convergences with an eye on the future. The emphasis in Mammallapuram seems to have been to 'manage' the differences 'prudently'. (1)

Trade deficit

There was a good conversation on trade, which is an issue of concern in India. Jinping after hearing Modi - at a bilateral delegation level meeting at Kovalam - on trade deficit said that China is ready to take sincere action in this regard, and to discuss in a very concrete way how to reduce the trade deficit. On the first day, both the leaders visited Mammallapuram and had a private meeting followed by by the bilateral delegation talk. When queried on the escalating trade war between the US-China, and the likely impact on the Indio-China trade, Gokhale said that there was no direct bearing on India-China trade on what is happening between the US and China. They are in the midst of an agreement, and we are awaiting the details. As far we are concerned, there is a significant market in China, and the Chinese say there is a significant market in India. The two leaders also agreed to explore of establishing manufacturing partnerships. Modi suggested that both the sides identify certain specific sectors where investment could come in and where manufacturing

could bring investment and create jobs and enhance market for both sides. One of the issues briefly touched up on was Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) - a proposed free trade agreement between the ten member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and its six FTA partners - on forming a regional trading agreement. Modi said that Indian looks forward to this and it is important that balanced is maintained in goods and services, and investments. Jinping said that both China and India will discuss this further, and Chinese President raised the issue of defence and security, and said there is a need to step up engagement in this area to enhance trusts between the two militaries and security forces. They also shared their respective approaches towards national development. The two leaders evaluated the direction of bilateral relations in a positive light and discussed how India-China bilateral interaction can be deepened to reflect the growing role of both countries on the global stage. They shared the view that the international situation is witnessing significant readjustment. They were of the view that India and China share the common objective of working for a peaceful, secure and prosperous world in which all countries can pursue their development within a rules-based international order. The leaders reiterated the consensus reached during the first Informal Summit in Wuhan, China, in April 2018, that India and China are factors for stability in the current international landscape and that both side will prudently manage their differences and not allow differences on any issue to become disputes. They also recognized that India and China have a common interest in preserving and advancing a rules-based and inclusive international order, including through reforms that reflect the new realities of the 21st Century. Both agreed that it is important to support and strengthen the rules-based multilateral trading system at a time when globally agreed trade practices and norms are being selectively questioned. India and China will continue to work together for open and inclusive trade arrangements that will benefit all countries.

Terrorism a common threat

The Mammallapuram Summit coined as “Chennai Connect” has been held against the backdrop of India’s abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which granted special status to Jammu and Kashmir. China has bitterly opposed the move to bifurcate the State of Jammu and Kashmir, and has supported Pakistan in internationalizing the dispute. China engineered a United Nations Security Council discussion on the issue, despite Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar travelling to Beijing to explain that India’s actions in Kashmir had no hidden motive for the Sino-Indian border dispute. Just a week before Xi’s

India visit, the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan stoked controversy by claiming that China would support Pakistan in the resolution of the Kashmir dispute. India responded by reiterating its position that this was an internal issue. Simultaneously, Chinese Vice Minister Luo Zhaohui raised objections to India's military exercises in Arunachal Pradesh. The Indian Army's newly raised 17 Corps recently took part in a military exercise at a height of around 15,000 ft, about 100 km from the Line of Actual Control. This is not the first time that China has objected to military exercises in Arunachal Pradesh, which is claimed by China as "South Tibet." Xi's visit was formally announced when Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa were in China. While Kashmir figured very prominently in the China-Pakistan joint statement, it conspicuously did not come up for discussion in the Mammallapuram summit. China's moves are always guided by the principle of power politics. But it is also true that India cannot afford anything less than stable and productive ties with China at a time of huge turbulence in the global geopolitical environment. China is facing pressure from the United States on economic issues. The turmoil in Hong Kong seems to be getting out of control; the image of the Chinese Communist Party has suffered a setback due to continuing anti-government protests. The Uyghur issue, pertaining to China's harsh treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, has attracted a lot of criticism. The United States recently blacklisted eight Chinese Artificial Intelligence (AI) companies associated with the surveillance of Muslims in Xinjiang. But it remains to be seen how India can take advantage of China's current vulnerabilities. China's willingness to block any concrete action against Pakistan for supporting terrorism has constituted one of the most pressing obstacles in having smooth relationship between New Delhi and Beijing. China believes that India poses one of the few potential challenges to its ambitions of Asian dominance. Therefore, the primary motivation behind China's strategic cultivation of Pakistan has been a long-held strategy of entangling India in the subcontinental rivalry. Beijing has been quite successful in that Indo-Pakistan hostility has prevented India's power and influence from spreading beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Both Pakistan and China have been single-minded in their pursuit to counter India, paving the way for one of the strongest strategic alignments in contemporary international politics. Both frequently define their partnership as "higher than the mountains and deeper than the oceans." Both leaders are concerned that terrorism continues to pose a common threat. As countries that are large and diverse, they recognised the importance of continuing to make joint efforts to ensure that the international community strengthens the framework against training, financing and supporting terrorist groups throughout the world and on a non-discriminatory basis. They shared the view that an open, inclusive,

prosperous and stable environment in the region is important to ensure the prosperity and stability of the region. They also agreed on the importance of concluding negotiations for a mutually beneficial and balanced RCEP.

Main goals of Modi for the Summit

Less formal summits, such as these, are designed to offer space for the two leaders to engage in candid conversations to develop a deeper understanding for each other, unencumbered by administrative formalities. For Modi, three broad objectives stand out. First, he is expected to reinforce that administrative changes within the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir are an internal matter for India. On August 5, 2019, the Indian government passed a presidential order to make changes to Article 370 of the Indian constitution, a provision that gave Jammu and Kashmir special status. In the middle of August, the Chinese Permanent Representative to the United Nations (UN) called for a closed-door Security Council meeting to discuss the changes. This has, without a doubt, irked the Indian leadership. Chinese officials, both in Beijing and elsewhere, had been briefed in detail about the changes and were told that these changes had no effect on India's external borders. Making sure that Xi appreciates and absorbs India's position in full will be of paramount importance for the Indian prime minister. Second, Xi and Modi meet at a time of shifting geopolitical realities. China-Russian ties grow stronger by the day, while there is little to cement fraying U.S.-China relations. What is increasingly clear is that the trade war between the United States and China is only a symptom of a new normal that licenses unfettered geostrategic competition. While Indian officials search for opportunities to leverage these geopolitical cracks—such as the possibility of shifting U.S. supply chains from China to India—it will be left to Modi to assess the extent to which Xi's China is prepared to accommodate, if not accept, Indian interests and concerns. There is no better time than the present to press Xi. China is very clearly reeling from the United States' combative methods. Third, at the operational level of economic diplomacy, Modi and Xi are expected to discuss a range of issues. These include the need for increased Chinese market access for Indian generic drugs, the possibility of greater Chinese Greenfield investments in India, and potentially, the thorny issue of 5G technologies and the future of Huawei in India. The case of the prominent Chinese telecommunications giant is especially sensitive. The Indian government is assessing the cost to its security of allowing Huawei to join future 5G auctions against the cost of keeping the firm out. In turn, for China, Huawei is nothing less than a national champion. Senior Chinese officials openly have made the case for

Huawei and have even underlined the potential damage to the bilateral relationship if Huawei is not allowed to take part in India's prospective 5G auctions. What should have otherwise been a technical issue best handled by officials could very well make its way into the conversation between the two leaders. The tenor of this discussion will matter more to the future of China-Indian relations than anyone could have guessed two or three years ago. The ever-present issue of the contested border between India and China is bound to be discussed. The last informal summit at Wuhan was fundamentally convened to allow both leaders to move past a seventy day military impasse at the border in Doklam during the summer of 2017 on Bhutanese territory contested by China. An exchange of official notes between China and India in 2012 underlined that a long-standing dispute with regards to the location of a tri-junction point— where Indian, Chinese and Bhutanese territories intersect—would be solved by all the three involved parties. In the summer of 2017, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) unilaterally began building a road in the region, forcefully changing the facts on the ground. At present, there are two ways of approaching the border: a modest, highly achievable advance, or something a lot more ambitious, where the payoff would be high but the outcome far less certain. On the more modest side of things, Modi and Xi are expected to discuss the possibility of doing more for people-to-people movements across a land customs station in the Himalayas known as Nathu La. The aim is to find ways to give local trade a fillip. This approach wouldn't require an incredible amount of creativity, but it does call for a commitment from both leaders to continue to de-securitize parts of the border. Doing something more ambitious would require more give and take. The India-China border is divided into four sectors. The border has not been delimited in any of these sectors. That is to say, India and China have not formally agreed to the outer limits of what is known as the Line of Actual Control (LOAC). The LOAC is quite simply a line demarcating Indian and Chinese military control of their respective perceptions of the border. Chinese officials argue that India could consider an "early harvest" or a partial solution, with regards to the long and so far undefined border. Simply put, they suggest formally delimiting what is known as the Sikkim sector, a part of the border close to where the Doklam standoff took place, rather than looking to resolve the dispute in all four sectors at the same time. For such a deal to be taken seriously, China watchers in India argue that Xi should in fact put two possibilities on the table. First, apart from Sikkim, an additional sector, they suggest, ought to be considered in the early harvest formulation. Specifically, this is what Indian officials refer to as the middle sector, which borders the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh. Second, they contend, serious movement on the border could be realized if Xi agreed to the formal

clarification of the entire length of the boundary. This process started in the early 1990s, but there has been little progress to date. Essentially, China has been unyielding in this regard, and has blocked any attempt to even clarify or formally accept the exact location of the border. These advances would require a degree of determination in both India and China that has largely been unprecedented. Most officials discount this possibility. On the other hand, if there is a pair of leaders who could cut such a deal, it's Modi and Xi. Whether or not they choose to venture beyond what is modestly possible, will, to an extent, come down to the personal faith they place in each other. (2)

Conclusion

Due to unresolved border disputes and the huge power imbalance between two countries, India continues to suffer on economic, diplomatic, and strategic fronts. Despite the Wuhan summit, China had no problem with taking actions that displeased India — whether the question of blocking India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group or opposing India's Kashmir move in the UNSC. Therefore, it is China's responsibility now to demonstrate seriousness in mending fences with India through the "Mammallapuram Spirit". At Mammallapuram, Xi and Modi are meeting at a time when China seeks to regionalize the world, but this time, with Chinese money and physiognomy. On the other hand, the United States strives to de-globalize international politics. This leaves unanswered questions about the future of the global trading order and that of multilateralism more broadly. India and China will need to design a durable, forward-looking framework that balances the challenges inherent in their relationship with the opportunities it presents. This can only really happen if Xi and Modi can find a new way to finely calibrate the relationship between competition and cooperation. For India, this balancing act will require pressing China where it matters, such as working more closely with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific. This will entail focusing on national economic development, while keeping in mind that China's purchasing power parity is significantly greater than that of India. And New Delhi will also need to remain firm on the BRI and core Indian security and economic concerns, while finding creative and effective ways to leverage the many possible opportunities in the relationship between two Asian giants.

Notes and References

- (1) The Hindu, October 8, 2019.
- (2) Hindustan Times, October 10, 2019
- (3) The Indian Express, October 11, 2019
- (4) The Hindu, October 12, 2019.

