

# 亚洲策 | Asia Insights

## India China:

*Managing Differences and Building Trust, yet again*

Avinash Godbole

Assistant Professor, O.P. Jindal Global University

It is, by now, a well-accepted fact that India China bilateral relations are complex. Not only that, there have been so many downswings in the last decade that a lot of energy has had to be invested in the repair and restore process. Stapled visas and the subsequent standoffs including at Daulat beg Oldi, Chumar, Demchok and the biggest of it all the one in Doklam have threatened to derail the relations. During each incident, meetings and exercise and dialogues and exchange visits were postponed or delayed as tensions built. As a consequence, after each incident, there has been a fresh start. This appears to have entered a loop. The big question is how to manage the cyclical ups and downs better and if it is even possible to get of this pattern.

India China relations also have their own set of lexicons; civilizational connections being one, ancient civilizations with shared history being another. In the post-colonial era, we also had Asian civilizations, Asian values and many others. One of the newest phrase that seems to have entered the India-China relations' lexicon is the *Wuhan consensus*. The Ministry of External Affairs Statement on Wuhan says what can be seen as the Wuhan Consensus.

*“(the two leaders)...shared the view that peaceful, stable and balanced relations between India and China will be a positive factor for stability amidst current global uncertainties. They also agreed that proper*

*management of the bilateral relationship will be conducive for the development and prosperity of the region, and will create the conditions for the Asian Century. To this end, they decided to strengthen the Closer Development Partnership in a mutually beneficial and sustainable manner, in pursuit of national modernization and greater prosperity for their peoples.”<sup>1</sup>*

Primary glance at the statement reveals that the consensus is nothing but the initiation of restoration of the bilateral relations after the Doklam derailment. There would never have been a requirement of Wuhan consensus if the strategic communication between India and China were to be robust enough. However it was not and that is what led to the Doklam standoff and the crisis around it.

Following the informal summit at Wuhan in April 2018, the two leaders, Prime Minister Modi and President Xi have met thrice more in 2018, in Qingdao, Johannesburg, and in Sao Paulo and have reiterated the idea of *Wuhan Consensus*. This consensus of course came up after the most serious setback to the bilateral relations the Doklam crisis. Every meeting, visit, dialogue and exchange since Wuhan has been labelled to have been conducted again, in Wuhan consensus. Besides the four top-level meetings, three important ministers, China’s Minister of National Defence Lt Gen Wei Fanghe, Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi, and State Councillor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi have all visited India. Indian Foreign and Defence Ministers Ms. Sushma Swaraj and Ms. Nirmala Sitharaman visited China for SCO related ministers; meetings. The annual defence dialogue has been restored along with the annual hand-in-hand exercises. The first India China High-Level Mechanism on People-to-People Exchanges was held recently. Third edition of the India-China Think Tanks Forum was held in Delhi recently and the India-China High Level Media Forum was held in Delhi on December 21. There has also been a bilateral dialogue on Museum Management, and another on Technology Transfer, Collaborative Innovation and Investment.

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<sup>1</sup> “Press Releases: India-China Informal Summit at Wuhan,” Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), last modified on April 28, 2018, [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29853/IndiaChina\\_Informal\\_Summit\\_at\\_Wuhan](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29853/IndiaChina_Informal_Summit_at_Wuhan).

This list is long and impressive and may be able to enhance cooperation in old areas and open new areas as well. However, whether such processes address any of the significant issues of difference remains unanswered. By now it is agreed among strategic experts, at least in Delhi, that the real breakthrough between India and China happened in 1993 and in 2003. The Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas, signed on 7 September 1993, is the foundational agreement between India and China that has driven all the successive confidence building initiatives.<sup>2</sup> The 2003 agreement got over the centrality of threat perceptions as guiding force of the bilateral relations, helped begin to see each other's rise as an opportunity and acknowledged the presence of the strategic dilemma between the two.<sup>3</sup>

This framework worked well in the Hu Jintao era when China's estimation of its power and of its security environment was of a different nature. Under the Xi regime, China is different. A cursory look at the timeline of the disputes in the recent past showcases that on most of the occasions, it has been China that has challenged the legitimacy of the Indian action or position on the ground and all of the incidents listed above and which derailed or threatened to derail relations have happened under the Xi regime. China is a rising as well as aspirational power which is also insecure about being circled. It should avoid doing to others what it does not like being done to it and clearly if at all there was any proof required that its multibillion dollar project of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was strategic in nature, it's already there.<sup>4</sup> Thus, this only proves the Indian apprehensions about BRI right. It was not going to be a panacea for all the distrust and linking Yangtze to Ganges and onwards to Nile was not going to cool down the waters or the air. India has always said that regional connectivity projects are useful only if they take care of each other's sensitivities and are based on transparency and inclusiveness.

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<sup>2</sup> Nirupama Rao, "A season to Repair," *The Hindu*, February, 03, 2017,

<https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/A-season-to-repair-relations/article17155684.ece>

<sup>3</sup> "Documents signed between India and China during Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit to China," Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), last modified on June 23, 2003, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/7692/Documents+signed+between+India+and+China+during+Prime+Minister+Vajpayees+visit+to+China>.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Abi-Habib, "China's 'Belt and Road' Plan in Pakistan Takes a Military Turn," *New York Times*, last modified on December 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/world/asia/pakistan-china-belt-road-military.html?fbclid=IwAR2jvDqrxgrrEfTf0F5RPpnYOO791dI9DicZwsxExZau7jgiypn7IFclSJA>.

As a consequence, it does look like India China have entered into a loop; crisis happens, a cold phase follows and the exchanges resume and seem to give a new momentum, only until the next one happens. In fact, none of the glossy feel good factors have helped India and China avoid the strategic mistrust. Somehow, the idea that common history and overlapping ideas of future would help the two countries come closer have not worked. Clearly commonalities are not enough to keep Asia out of the balance of power priorities that the old civilizations can and indeed pursue as modern nation states.

In this context, the India China relations need a new template that allows for acknowledging India and China as sovereign territorial nation states. A more honest and candid approach, working on what works for improving relations and being honest and direct about what does not is required. In addition, a new template for strategic communications is absolutely necessary. A relook at previous mechanisms like the border dialogue, the border defence cooperation agreement (BDCA) and refreshing of those is useful too.<sup>5</sup> India is also growing and has interests of its own. As the two sides reach out to the world, they will increasingly come in contact. In some areas there will be common interest and cooperation, in some competition. A constant review of each other's red lines is also useful and hopefully a process is being set to ensure that the relapsing patterns of hot and cold relations are avoided.

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<sup>5</sup> Prime Minister's Office, *Border Defence Cooperation Agreement between India and China*, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, October 23, 2013, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=100178>.

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**Institute of International Relations @ National Chengchi University**  
No.64, Wanshou Rd., Wenshan District  
Taipei City, 116, Republic of China (Taiwan)  
<http://iir.nccu.edu.tw>

**Center for Southeast Asian Studies @ National Chengchi University**  
No.64, Wanshou Rd., Wenshan District  
Taipei City, 116, Republic of China (Taiwan)  
<http://cseas.nccu.edu.tw>

**Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies @ FLAME University**  
Gat No. 1270, Lavale, Off. Pune Bangalore Highway,  
Vadzai, Dist. Pune - 412115, India  
[http:// www.flame.edu.in/research/centres/centre-for-south-and-southeast-asia-studies](http://www.flame.edu.in/research/centres/centre-for-south-and-southeast-asia-studies)