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Takshashila Discussion Document

# Modi-Xi Informal Summit: An Indian Interests Agenda

Discussion Document 2019-07

07 October 2019

By Manoj Kewalramani



This paper can be cited as Kewalramani, Manoj. "Modi-Xi Informal Summit: An Indian Interests Agenda." *Takshashila Discussion Document 2019-07*, October 7, 2019.

## Executive Summary

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be hosting Chinese President Xi Jinping for an informal summit in the coastal town of Mamallapuram in Tamil Nadu in October 2019. The summit is a timely opportunity to address some of the stressors that are fraying the fabric of the Wuhan spirit and deepen bilateral engagement between the two countries. In that context, this discussion document outlines an agenda for dialogue at Mamallapuram and recommends specific courses of action, keeping in mind India's national interests.

The document is structured as follows. The first section lists the interests of both leaders. It also identifies key issues that the Chinese side is likely to focus on and lists India's priorities. The second section outlines an agenda across four broad areas and recommends 15 specific courses of action that the Indian government should pursue.

# I. Interests & Priorities

China's most important foreign policy priority is to manage the deepening systemic competition with the United States. During the Mamallapuram summit, the Chinese side is, therefore, expected to focus on broad strategic issues. Xi is likely to pursue clarity on India's deepening relationship with the United States. Beijing views India as a potential US ally in what it perceives as an emerging policy of containment.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Xi is likely to seek reaffirmation of the commitments made in Wuhan.<sup>2</sup> Stability along the periphery and, if not supportive, then at least a non-aligned India is what Xi desires.

On economic and trade policy, the Chinese agenda will entail ensuring India's openness to Chinese goods and investment and technology cooperation. Along with this, he's likely to press Modi for progress on the RCEP deal and potential joint projects in third-party states.

President Xi is also likely to raise the issue of stability along the boundary, particularly in the context of India's decision in August 2019 to scrap the special status of Jammu and Kashmir and create two new Union Territories. The focus from the Chinese side is likely to be on ensuring stability along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) rather than resolving the dispute. Given the power asymmetry between the two sides and inherent conflicts of Indian and Chinese geopolitical interests, Beijing has little incentive to resolve the dispute. In fact, it is a useful stressor and signalling mechanism that China is unlikely to let go of in the near future. Finally, Beijing is likely to seek New Delhi's silence, if not support, for the PRC's appointment of the next Dalai Lama.

Meanwhile, India's broad interests involve ensuring border stability and leveraging China's rise to boost India's economic development. To do this, the boundary dispute between India and China remains the paramount hurdle. The Indian side should, therefore, press the Chinese side for tangible movement towards the resolution of this dispute. At the same time, India should also pursue deeper military-to-military engagement between the two sides to ensure stability, breed familiarity, and enhance understanding of the PLA's organisational structures, decision-making matrix, and approaches to training.

On broad strategic issues, India should reiterate the country's decisional autonomy, assuring Xi that ties with other states are not targeted at any third party. India should also refrain from a commitment on the issue of a future Dalai Lama, framing the conversation in the context of an internal religious matter for the Tibetan community. Instead, Modi should focus the talks on deepening convergences in interests across a spectrum of issues, such as climate change, urban governance, combating terrorism, global governance reform, and connectivity. Finally, on trade, the Indian prime minister must encourage Chinese investments in Indian infrastructure development, emphasise

the need to address the deficit along with market access restrictions and non-tariff barriers that impact Indian firms in China. In case of the trade deficit, it is vital for Modi to press Xi to announce publicly stated targets.

Informality often yields fine rhetoric but breeds ambiguity. Therefore, it is crucial for New Delhi to push for clear, publicly stated objectives where it can.

## II. The Agenda

This section outlines the agenda for the talks in Mamallapuram across four broad areas and recommends specific courses of action.

### A. Boundary Dispute & Military Engagement

The dispute over the Sino-Indian land boundary is likely to persist as a source of friction between the two sides in the near term. While there are well-established negotiating mechanisms, an early harvest or resolution is unlikely in the near future. Both sides have already held 21 rounds of Special Representatives-level talks. These conversations, however, have failed to yield clarity on the extent of China's territorial claims.<sup>3</sup> That is not just a reflection of the complexity of the dispute but also of the political will in Beijing.

What, nevertheless, has been achieved is that both sides have, over the decades, managed to contain escalation of border incidents into broader disputes. The strategic guidance issued by both leaders to their forces after the Wuhan Summit was one more step in this direction. On the ground, strategic guidance has translated into reworking of rules of engagement along the LAC, such as the use of staggered timings of patrols, use of escorted patrols, amendments to drills to avoid physical contact and regular commander-level engagement.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, since April 2018, the scale and intensity of border incidents have reduced.<sup>5</sup>

Ensuring peace and tranquillity at the border is paramount to the stability and advancement of the Sino-Indian relationship. In order to build on the gains since Wuhan, it is therefore imperative for the Indian government to pursue the following objectives in Mamallapuram:

1. **While an early resolution of the boundary dispute is unlikely, New Delhi should press Beijing for clarity on its territorial claims.** Considering Sino-Indian power asymmetry, the Government of India must acknowledge that the PRC is unlikely to take substantive steps to resolve the boundary dispute in the near term. The dispute is a strategic stressor that Beijing can leverage to pressure New Delhi as and when it desires. Nevertheless, it is important for India to continue to call for clarity on Chinese territorial claims, including exchanges of maps delineating these claims, and stress that peace on the border is a prerequisite to deeper ties.
2. **Greater clarity is needed on organisational and decision-making structures of the PLA to ensure peace and tranquillity at the border.** There are structural and organisational differences between the PLA and the Indian Army. There is,

therefore, a need for clarity with regard to command structures to facilitate engagement. India should press for the identification of offices of equivalent ranks in terms of organisational hierarchy on both sides that should be engaging with each other to ensure peace and tranquillity at the border.

3. **Enhancing military-to-military CBMs requires the establishment of hotlines and linkages between defence academies and institutions.** During Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe's visit to India in August 2018, both sides agreed to cooperate on military "training, joint exercises and other professional interactions."<sup>6</sup> There was also an in-principle agreement on establishing a hotline between relevant departments of the armed forces. Progress on this, however, has been extremely slow. New Delhi, therefore, must press for the establishment of hotlines at the level of army headquarters and local commands. In addition, the conversation should focus on ironing out the contours of collaboration between military education and research institutions in both countries.
4. **Cooperation in the IOR should be bilateral in nature and limited in scope.** Following the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Indian Ocean Region has rapidly emerged as a key area of interest for Beijing. The two sides already engage in a formal maritime dialogue, which began in 2016. The second meeting happened in 2018.<sup>7</sup> The mechanism can be leveraged to identify common interests and contain frictions, but New Delhi should avoid any collaboration that normalises the presence of Chinese warships in the IOR.

## **B. Trade & Investments**

India and China entered the 21st century with a bilateral trade volume of less than \$3 billion. Since then, bilateral goods trade has witnessed explosive growth, crossing \$90 billion. This expansion, however, has been unbalanced, with China enjoying an overwhelming trade surplus.<sup>8</sup> At one level, there are low-cost Chinese goods that continue to dominate the Indian market. At another, there are deep concerns about market access restrictions in China and industrial policies distorting the market. Restoring balance in the trade relationship with China has, therefore, been one of India's priorities following the Wuhan summit. Since then, both sides have engaged in more purposeful negotiations. These have so far yielded rhetorical commitments and marginal outcomes, which have failed to ease fundamental Indian concerns. This is evident in the friction between the two sides when it comes to talks on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.<sup>9</sup>

Following Wuhan, China has formally agreed to ease market access for certain Indian agricultural products, such as non-basmati rice, fish meal, fish oil, tobacco leaves and chilli meal.<sup>10</sup> In addition, in July 2018, China said that it would reduce tariffs on Indian generics, ease regulatory hurdles and expedite approval processes. However, movement on this front has been glacial.<sup>11</sup> Changes to Chinese drug legislation, announced in August 2019, are likely to create opportunities for the expansion of Indian pharma exports.<sup>12</sup> It is, however, important to note that ensuring freer and fairer trade in drugs was not the driving force behind this move. Instead, it is the dynamics of the Chinese healthcare market, characterised by an ageing population, mounting demand for cheap drugs and a slow and cumbersome regulatory process, that will drive policy.

Meanwhile, on the investment front, the Government of India has set up a dedicated China desk under its Invest India platform, in the hope that this will facilitate higher Chinese investments in India. Following the Wuhan summit, estimates inform that Chinese investors have focussed on the Indian start-up ecosystem, pouring over \$5.6 billion in sectors such as food-tech, logistics, retail, artificial intelligence, Internet of Things and Fintech.<sup>13</sup> While capital infusion creates fresh opportunities for Indian start-ups, there are concerns regarding Chinese investments in the tech sector having implications for national and data security.

Under these circumstances, it is recommended that India pursue the following negotiating track at Mamallapuram:

1. **India should pursue the declaration of a clear and stated target for the reduction of the trade deficit within a fixed timeframe.** Merely restating rhetorical positions on the desire for a balanced trade relationship is meaningless. Instead, India should call for trade negotiators on both sides to set a publicly stated target for deficit reduction. Both leaders should also identify key sectors that can be focussed on to achieve this target. This will not just commit both sides towards taking tangible steps within a defined timeframe but also motivate both bureaucracies to act.
2. **India should pursue increased Chinese investments in a range of sectors to boost exports and infrastructure development.** During President Xi Jinping's state visit in September 2014, China had committed to investing \$20 billion in India over a period of five years. This target has not been achieved, although the pace of investment has picked up. It is important to take stock of this and identify means to expand Chinese investments. Increasingly Chinese capital has focussed on technology start-ups in India. Some of the other key sectors that have seen increased Chinese investment include real estate, electronics, renewable energy and textiles.<sup>14</sup> While this is welcome from a business-to-business connectivity



perspective, it is important that bottlenecks - such as information gaps, data requirements and land acquisition issues - impeding investments in roads and railways are addressed.

3. **On technology cooperation and the role of Huawei in 5G networks, India should frame the conversation within a broader framework of trade reciprocity.** In this context, the Indian side should argue the Great Firewall - by blocking platforms like Google, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook - also intentionally and systematically prevents Indian companies and individuals from profiting from the Chinese market. It effectively acts as a non-tariff barrier, discriminating against Indian technology firms and content creators. Status quo, therefore, is unacceptable, if the two sides are to deepen technology collaboration. Apart from trade reciprocity, the Indian side should also underscore that its decisions on new technologies are based purely on technical and security considerations.
  
4. **India should work with China to identify areas of common interests in terms of cyber governance and security.** Initial steps in this direction can be taken in two areas, data localisation and cybersecurity. In terms of the former, China has already enacted legislation requiring data localisation, although it is a signatory to the Osaka Track dialogue. India, meanwhile, has objected to the Osaka Track framework, terming data as national wealth and seeking dialogue at the WTO. Given their market size and potential to emerge as data powerhouses, there is immense potential to find common ground in terms of future global protocols on data governance. In terms of cybersecurity, it is important that New Delhi highlight the increasing number cyberattacks originating from China targeting the Indian government, security and private platforms.<sup>15</sup> This has to be stressed as a critical component of building strategic trust.

## C. Geopolitical Issues

The broad consensus following the Wuhan Summit was that both sides recognised the need for the Sino-Indian relationship to remain peaceful, stable and balanced amidst unfolding global changes. Building a closer developmental partnership, while pursuing a multipolar and more participatory international order, is the stated objective of both states. In this context, in Wuhan, the two leaders decided to approach the relationship from a long-term perspective, stressing on their desire to maintain strategic and decisional autonomy.



This framework underscores a certain congruence of interests, for instance in the context of WTO reform, connectivity projects, combatting terrorism, energy security and tackling climate change. However, there have been few, if any, tangible outcomes on strategic issues. For instance, China continues to block India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group. It is the only UN Security Council P5 member that hasn't supported India's bid for a permanent seat on a reformed council. Moreover, despite its desire to support the development of alternative energy sources, Beijing remains ambivalent about partnering in the India-led International Solar Alliance. On the other hand, New Delhi's view on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) remains largely unchanged from its position articulated in 2017.<sup>16</sup> India did not send a delegation to the 2019 Belt and Road Forum and remains reserved about collaborating on projects in third-party countries.

All this shows informs that both sides are keen to maintain a stable relationship, but cooperation is likely to be transactional. Beijing has little to gain from the expansion of New Delhi's global role, and therefore, it is unlikely to yield on strategic issues. Moreover, the emphasis on strategic autonomy by Beijing is largely in reference to its concerns over the growing Indo-US proximity. Chinese media commentaries often cast the Indo-US relationship as an attempt to balance China.<sup>17</sup> A recent assessment by a BJP Member of Parliament following a visit to China also emphasises this as being Beijing's primary concern with regard to New Delhi.<sup>18</sup>

Given the above, India should look to focus on following outcomes during the Mamallapuram summit:

1. **India must reiterate that it remains committed to the broad strategic consensus on international issues arrived at in Wuhan.** India remains committed to economic globalisation and pursuing the establishment of a more open, multipolar and participatory global order. Its relationships with other states, including the United States, are driven by Indian interests and not directed at any third party.
2. **India should emphasise that the roadmap for deeper Sino-Indian cooperation rests on respect for each other's core interests and aspirations.** It is important for New Delhi to emphasise that Beijing's aggressive reaction to the change in the special status for Jammu and Kashmir undermines strategic trust. In this context, a course-correction would be conducive to future cooperation. In addition, India must stress that over the years both states have worked together at multilateral forums such as the WTO, BRICS and AIIB. China's objections with regard to India's legitimate aspirations to be part of institutions like the NSG and UNSC and its hesitation to partner in the International Solar Alliance undermines the potential of such cooperation.

3. **India must refrain from any specific commitment with regard to the future of the institution of the Dalai Lama.** Over the past few months, the PRC has suggested that it is preparing the ground for the appointment of the next Dalai Lama. This comes amidst reports of health issues being faced by the 84-year-old 14th Dalai Lama. Beijing has been clear that the Dalai Lama's reincarnation is not merely a religious issue, but also a political one. It believes that reincarnation of living Buddhas should follow Chinese laws and regulations, religious rituals and conventions. It has also warned that any perceived Indian interference in this process will impact the bilateral relationship. Xi is, therefore, likely to raise this with Modi, who in turn should maintain that the Indian government views this as a religious and not a political matter.
  
4. **The Indian side should push for deeper counter-terrorism cooperation, terming this as a core interest for India.** The Indian side must emphasise that radical terrorism is a common enemy for both countries. Both India and China have been talking about counter-terror cooperation at multiple forums, such as bilaterally at the Joint Working Group level and multilaterally under the BRICS and RIC frameworks. However, there is little known about the impact of these talks. It is important for the Indian side to stress that development in South Asia is contingent on security and freedom from terror.

## D. Paradiplomacy & People-to-People Engagement

Cooperation between India and China at sub-national levels is still at a nascent stage. This is a result of a number of factors, including the strategic mistrust that characterises bilateral ties and inward-looking nature of state leaderships and bureaucracies in India. However, the past few years, starting from 2013, have seen some momentum towards greater paradiplomacy. In 2015, during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Beijing, the two sides established a State/Provincial Leaders' Forum.<sup>19</sup> This was an important statement of intent.

At present, both sides have established 8 pairs of sister cities and two pairs of sister provinces. Such efforts can go a long way in building a more organic and cooperative relationship, strengthening it from the bottom-up. This is critical for deepening people-to-people engagement, a key objective that emerged from the Wuhan summit. Since then, both sides have established a High Level Mechanism on Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges and put together a Plan of Action for marquee events in 2020. While such

events can generate buzz, it is important that sub-national governments take the lead in crafting policies and programs to attract Chinese tourists and students.

In this context, at the Mamallapuram summit:

1. **Both sides should announce a timeframe to convene the next State/Provincial Leaders' Forum.** It is important to give teeth to this platform with parties outlining objectives and outcome expectations. For instance, the next forum could be arranged with a thematic agenda, such as urban governance or renewable and alternative energy projects in order to better direct cooperation.
2. **Both sides should work towards a roadmap for establishing greater connectivity between major metropolises based on sectoral expertise.** For instance, it is important to expand connectivity - physical and business - among cities that are hubs for technological development on both sides.
3. **Both sides should announce plans to encourage and facilitate roadshows by provincial and city governments to attract tourists and students.** Some of the ways in which New Delhi and Beijing can take the lead in this direction are by easing visa restrictions and working with local governments in launching online platforms in local languages to attract Chinese tourists. Another potential area for cooperation is facilitating university linkages in terms of infrastructure and joint development of education programs.

## Appendix: Background Note

The Kautulian concept of *yogakshema*, implying the well-being, prosperity and happiness of all Indians, represents a broad definition of India's national interests. This must be the overarching objective guiding India's economic, foreign and national security policies. In this context, the expansion of China's aggregate power and global interests has implications for India's pursuit of its core interests.

Historically, the relationship between the modern Indian and Chinese states has been characterised by strands of cooperation, competition and even conflict. However, China's rapid economic growth and consequent enhancement of political, diplomatic, military and technological capabilities since the early 1980s have added a new dimension to the relationship. Structurally, there now exists a deep power asymmetry between the two countries. This coupled with President Xi Jinping's increasingly assertive foreign policy and shifts in the US' global role necessitates a fundamental rethinking of the bilateral relationship.

Today, while old sources of friction between India and China persist, there are also new challenges and opportunities. Competition between the two states is increasingly likely to be a product of historical distrust, expanding and overlapping interests and divergences over fundamental values. On the other hand, cooperation is likely to be transactional, driven by pragmatic self-interest.

The Wuhan summit of April 2018 was a step in this direction of defining a new template for stabilising and potentially deepening the bilateral relationship. What necessitated the meeting was a desire to stem the rapid deterioration of Sino-Indian ties, punctuated by the 2017 Doklam standoff.<sup>20</sup> The broad framework that was agreed upon in Wuhan entailed three dimensions:

First, both sides would seek to advance the relationship keeping in mind the strategic and long-term perspective, while respecting each other's sensitivities, concerns and aspirations. Second, the leadership in both countries committed to pursuing deeper and broad-based engagement in order to build trust. Third, maintaining peace and tranquillity along the disputed land boundary is fundamental to advancing on the above-mentioned agenda.

The dictum underscoring this approach was that differences must not be allowed to turn into disputes.

Since then, there had been signs of gradual, yet positive momentum. These were evident in the listing of Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar as a UN designated terrorist, more

purposeful talks on expanding trade and investments and the establishment of a new high-level mechanism for cultural and people-to-people engagement.

Events over the past few months, however, suggest that this progress is stuttering under the weight of the inherent conflicts between Indian and Chinese interests. Beijing has been extremely critical of New Delhi's August 5th decision to strip the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir of its special status and carve out two new union territories. It protested the move as a violation of China's "territorial sovereignty."<sup>21</sup> Despite Foreign Minister S Jaishankar's visit to assuage Chinese concerns,<sup>22</sup> Beijing backed Pakistan's request for a discussion by United Nations Security Council members.<sup>23</sup>

Subsequently, early September witnessed the first major post-Wuhan face-off between the Indian and Chinese troops along the LAC in Ladakh.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, talks between the Special Representatives on the boundary issue, scheduled to take place in September, were postponed.<sup>25</sup> Frictions over CPEC have also once again become a matter of public discourse, with the MEA reiterating that the projects were being carried out in territory that "has been illegally occupied by Pakistan."<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, on the economic front, market access for Indian goods and services in China remain a challenge. These concerns are also reflected in the negotiations of the terms of the 16-nation Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement. Another key issue weighing over the relationship is India's pending decision on the participation of Chinese telecoms and technology firms in the development of 5G network systems. This links New Delhi's apprehensions with regard to Chinese investments in India along with the politicisation of technological advancements internationally. Finally, shifts in US policy, i.e., the intensification of systemic competition with China, and a deepening relationship with India, regardless of trade frictions, are creating new opportunities and challenges.

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