

India China Relations Regain Their Even Keel

Shyam Saran



Prime Minister Modi of India and President Xi Jinping of China met on October 23, after a gap of five years, on the margins of the recent meeting of the BRICS Plus grouping in Kazan, Russia.

Just a couple of days before the Modi-Xi summit, China acceded to persistent Indian demands for the restoration of patrolling in two strategically important segments of the border in eastern Ladakh - Depsang and Demchok - which the Chinese troops had blocked since the clashes which took place in April 2020. They also agreed to dismantle temporary structures and tents set up on what India insists are areas on its side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), which has served as the de-facto boundary between the two sides pending its final settlement. Latest [reports](#) indicate that the disengagement of troops in forward locations has already been carried out and temporary structures and tents have been removed. At the two points of friction under discussion over the past four years, the situation prevailing before April 2020 has been restored. The two sides have also agreed to resume patrolling in the contested areas but in accordance with a mutually-agreed and pre-notified schedule to avoid encounters as much as possible.

The present agreement is, however, limited only to Depsang and Demchok. It neither applies to the rest of the LAC in eastern Ladakh nor to the longer stretch of the border in the east. The limited agreements reached earlier to create buffer zones in the areas where the original clashes took place in April 2020, which is the Galwan river valley and later the Pangong Lake area, will be left undisturbed. This means that patrolling by Indian troops in these segments as was possible before April 2020, will not be restored. The assertion that the two sides have gone back to where they were before April 2020 is, then, only partially true.

The two sides were able to reach enough agreement to make possible the ensuing meeting between their leaders and a successful BRICS Plus summit.

The Relevance of the BRICS Plus Summit

The BRICS originally comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. It has now been expanded to include Egypt and Ethiopia from Africa and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Iran from West Asia. India was not supportive of the expansion to begin with but changed its

position since it had close and friendly relations with several of the countries involved. It was also able to extract an assurance that its South Asian adversary, Pakistan, would not be admitted though this was strongly pressed by China. BRICS Plus now comprises the key emerging economies of the world, representing all major geographies. It has acquired legitimacy as a representative grouping of the Global South and is destined to play a more influential role in international affairs. Continued hostility between two of its largest and founder members, India and China, would have detracted from that role. For both China and Russia it was important to project that significant countries of the Global South are aligned with them, despite the United States and the West in general being in confrontation with them.

There is also a view that the worsening economic situation in China has led to a less assertive foreign policy stance generally. That may well have been a factor in China adopting a more accommodating stance towards India.

On the Indian side there has been a view among its corporate sector and some sections of its economic bureaucracy that India should relax the several restrictions it had put on Chinese imports and investment in the wake of the April 2020 border clashes. The Indian pharmaceutical industry is still heavily reliant of cheaper Chinese ingredients. Its electronic industry depends on critical Chinese components. India should, it is argued, allow Chinese investment in areas such as electric vehicles. Large construction firms still import a large volume of Chinese infrastructure machinery such as port handling facilities. The security argument against over-dependence on Chinese supplies is being eroded. China has sensed this as an opportunity of gaining greater access to the fastest growing large economy in the world at a time when other markets are being closed to it. That is why Xi Jinping declared that “development is currently the greatest common denominator between China and India”.

The Modi-Xi meeting in Kazan is important because it may lead to the resumption of a long-standing tradition of regular summits between their leaders. There had been annual bilateral summits and also meetings on the sidelines of regional and multilateral conferences. Even though these summits did not always produce substantive results, they were important in signalling to their respective governmental dispensations that the leaders were committed to pursuing a positive relationship between the two Asian giants. This lent an enduring stability to the relationship. The events of April 2020 upset this balance. Perhaps one may now be on the road to restoring an even keel in India-China relations.

Much Remains to be Done

Dis-engagement must be followed by de-escalation with a significant reduction in troop deployments. New Standard Operating Procedures will need to be agreed upon to deal with any local disputes on the border and possible encounters between their patrols. The swiftness with which the two sides have moved to implement the agreements reached augurs well for the future.

What about reactions from India's other partners? The United States reaction has been muted and no overt concern has been expressed. The shift is regarded as mainly tactical without changing the essentially adversarial and competitive relationship between the two countries. India and China have different world views. China seeks to promote multi-polarity in the international order. India sees multipolarity in Asia as an indispensable component of international multipolarity. This part is missing in the Chinese readout. And that tells its own tale.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shyam Saran is a former Foreign Secretary and a former Chairman of India's National Security Advisory Board. Since joining the Indian Foreign Service in 1970, he has served in several capitals of the world including Beijing, Tokyo and Geneva. He has been India's Ambassador to Myanmar, Indonesia and Nepal and High Commissioner to Mauritius. Saran has also served as Chairman, Research and Information System for Developing Countries, an autonomous think tank specializing in studies on economic and trade related issues, from January 2010 to January 2017. He is Honorary Senior Faculty and Member of the Governing Board at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi and a member of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network.

Cover image: Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi in a bilateral meeting with the President of the People's Republic of China, Mr. Xi Jinping, on the sidelines of the 16th BRICS Summit at Kazan, in Russia on October 23, 2024. Wikimedia Commons.

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