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Title	'New Way' to Manage Sino-Indian Engagement?
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Citation	Suryanarayana, P. S. (2019). 'New Way' to Manage Sino-Indian Engagement?. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 007). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2019
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/47451
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‘New Way’ to Manage Sino-Indian Engagement?

By P S Suryanarayana

SYNOPSIS

Buoyed by four summit meetings and the formation of a new people-to-people ‘mechanism’ in quick succession, China-India engagement appears to be on a firm track. Despite challenges, this marks an opportune moment to press ahead towards total rapprochement.

COMMENTARY

CHINA AND India have resorted to soft-power diplomacy to undergird their mutual pursuit of hard-power aims. Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi have met four times, informally on the first occasion and formally thereafter, in just eight months in 2018.

In a follow-up move on 21 December 2018, Indian and Chinese foreign ministers set up a “high-level mechanism” for people-to-people and cultural exchanges. The “mechanism” provides for sustainable links between think-tanks of the two neighbouring countries.

Focus on New Social Links

A greater frequency of dialogue between their media outlets is envisioned. Other provisions include acceleration of tourist flows in both directions, and collaboration between museums of these two ancient civilisations.

In tune with the current trend among youth, agreement has been reached for “co-production” of films and other forms of entertainment. During one of the Xi-Modi meetings in 2018, the Chinese leader interestingly spoke about the “popularity” of Indian-language films like *Dangal* (Hindi) and *Baahubali* (Telugu) in China.

Potential new avenues cover popularisation of the Chinese language in India and of Indian languages, notably Hindi, in China. Also discussed was India's yoga, an ancient technique for a sound mind in a sound body, which is gaining acceptance in China. Reciprocally, China will try and popularise its martial art-forms in India.

China sees this comprehensive soft-power mechanism as a social foundation to consolidate engagement with India, the two countries having had chequered relations for nearly 70 years now. But paradoxical is the fact that a soft-power outcome is the only concrete result after four cordial Xi-Modi meetings last year.

Sustaining Dialogue

The first Xi-Modi meeting in 2018, at Wuhan, China on 27 and 28 April, was hailed as a rare one-on-one informal summit. It helped the two countries to overcome the bitterness of their prolonged military standoff at Doklam (Dong Lang) in 2017. Indeed, it was decided that a second Sino-Indian informal summit would be held in 2019.

Of the three formal Xi-Modi meetings in 2018, the one held in Qingdao, China in June of that year, coincided with India's admission to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). China acquiesced to Russia's initiative for inviting India.

On balance, the Xi-Modi meetings in 2018 marked the most intensive China-India dialogue since 1954, the previous best year in bilateral diplomacy. The balance sheet on these meetings last year is, therefore, relevant to the way ahead.

On the qualitative side, the Xi-Modi meetings led to a flurry of discussions at the political and official levels. Talks on the border dispute have been held again, against a backdrop of expressions of goodwill. The defence ministers have met and the two armies resumed a joint exercise, emphasising coordination for counter-terrorism under the United Nations banner.

Strategic Opportunities

China's increasingly challenging interactions with the United States have offered Xi a rare strategic opportunity to seek a better engagement with India. His key objective is to ensure that Delhi does not make common cause with Washington against Beijing.

For Modi, too, the same Sino-American tensions provide a different kind of strategic opportunity to capitalise on China's and perhaps also America's overtures towards India.

As a result, Xi's and Modi's diplomacy may appear to converge on the basis of their current strategic considerations. Additionally, both have agreed to build a solid "social foundation" for China-India engagement. A caveat is that the outcome in this limited sphere will depend on the relative attractiveness of their respective soft-power skills.

India has traditionally prided itself on its rich variety, ranging from yoga and the fine arts to the modern cinema and computer science. China, too, emphasises its uniqueness in such areas as Confucian culture, sciences and the pedigree of the

Chinese language. However, both would have to avoid the counter-productive calculation about whose soft-power is more potent as a diplomatic tool.

Time and Space For Rapprochement

The central practical issue, as opposed to a strategic one, in today's Sino-Indian engagement is how much time and space Beijing and Delhi can find to move towards total rapprochement as Xi concentrates on piloting China's rise as a global superpower in the face of challenges from the US.

In the near-term, a reset of Sino-American relations, if it does happen, and the political complexion of India's next government will be critical to the prospects of Delhi-Beijing engagement, especially this year.

Another issue in the near-term is this: India's erstwhile partnership with China on issues of global commons, such as climate change and world trade, may prove more elusive than before. Why? The international community is gradually veering to the view that China, unlike India, is a developed country for all practical purposes, in regard to these two issues.

Longer Term: Three Steps Forward

For the longer term, China and India must settle not only their boundary dispute but also their huge bilateral trade imbalance. They must also avoid a potential cross-border river dispute over sharing the waters of the Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo). How can such stability be brought about?

Many see the huge deficit of trust in the relations between India and China, fuelled by history and their 1962 border war, as the real stumbling block. To go forward now, at least three steps are needed.

These are: firstly, meticulous adherence to existing Sino-Indian confidence-building measures; secondly, friendly but purposeful exercises and candid dialogue in the military domain; and thirdly soft-power diplomacy. India and China have projected their latest soft-power diplomacy as an enduring, not exploratory, exercise. They should, therefore, promote its key objective: know your neighbour's true identity.

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