

A 'China-India Plus': Continuity and Novelty in an Idea

By Prashant Kumar Singh

Narendra Modi was sworn in as India's prime minister on May 30, 2019, for a second term after his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the general election in May 2019. The continuity has raised expectations for the India-China relations during his second term. Modi's first term, which coincided with President Xi Jinping's first tenure, began on a promising note. The two leaders strove to further deepen bilateral cooperation. However, relations soon went south unexpectedly, which were driven back to normalcy in equally swift, yet thoughtful, moves.¹ Although

¹ While Xi's visit to India in September 2014 and Modi's to China in May 2015 successfully underlined their desire for further deepening economic and people-to-people relations, relationship faltered on diplomatic and military fronts. The two countries crossed each other's path on the following issues: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China's repeated technical holds on India's resolution in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) 1267 Sanctions Committee to sanction Pakistan-based terrorist Masood Azhar, China's blocking of India's application for the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in 2016, the 14th Dalai Lama's visit to Tawang in India's Arunachal Pradesh in March 2017. The two countries had a major military stand-off in India's Laddakh in September 2014. They survived the Doklam military crisis, from late June to late August 2017, which brought them dangerously close to war. After a cold silence of some months after the Doklam crisis, Modi and Xi held landmark "informal" summit in Wuhan, China. Separately, India objects to the CPEC, announced in April 2015, because it passes through Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK), which India considers as its own territory under Pakistan's



The Indian Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi at the first cabinet meeting, at the Prime Minister's Office, in South Block, New Delhi on May 31, 2019. (Source: Press Information Bureau, Government of India)

complex domestic and geopolitical processes wrote this fast-paced action-packed short story of ups and downs in relations, role of the personality of the two assertive leaders cannot be ignored.² The “informal” Wuhan Summit between Modi and Xi on April 27-28, 2018, was their personal intervention to end the bad phase in relations.

A lot can be postulated on macro level about likely aspects of bilateral relations, with reference to the political continuity in these two countries — Modi's second term and Xi's presidency without a term

illegal possession. The Dalai Lama's visit to Tawang invited China's ire as it lays claim over Arunachal Pradesh.

² Prashant Kumar Singh, “Resurfacing of Divergence in India-China Relations,” in *East Asia Strategic Review: China's Rising Strategic Ambitions in Asia*, ed. M.S. Prathibha (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2018), pp. 35-72.

limit. However, this article delves into micro-theme — ‘China-India Plus’ format of bilateral cooperation, which has stemmed from the Wuhan Spirit that emanated from the Wuhan Summit.³ The Wuhan Spirit affirms that bilateral relations interact with each other at multiple levels of international politics, with regional and international implications, which require them to work towards developing greater degree of strategic mutual trust. It reaffirms vital role of India and China cooperation in actualising *Asian Century*. It motivates the two countries to pass on the benefits of their developmental capacities to the less developing countries. Thus, ‘China-India Plus’ in Afghanistan,⁴ a direct result of the Wuhan Summit and first example of implementation of the Wuhan Spirit in the region, has got strategic as well as developmental dimensions (to be highlighted separately). Incidentally, think-tank and civil-society advocacy for trilateral cooperation, involving China and India and any other South Asian country, predates the ‘China-India Plus.’ However, this is the first official endorsement of any such proposal.

Since ‘China-India Plus’ has flown from the “informal summit” between Xi and Modi, this nascent cooperation format may receive an advocacy push in coming months and years, particularly, after the second

³ “India-China Informal Summit at Wuhan,” Press Release, Media Centre, India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), April 28, 2019, at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29853/IndiaChina_Informal_Summit_at_Wuhan (Accessed June 06, 2019).

⁴ K.J.M. Varma, “Wuhan Summit: India, China to Undertake Joint Economic Project in Afghanistan,” Live Mint, April 28, 2018, at <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/ETJ8tth0aj3TOX4ZEX3Gyl/Wuhan-summit-India-China-to-undertake-joint-economic-proje.html> (Accessed June 06, 2019).

“informal” summit proposed to be held anytime soon in India. Therefore, its potential in realising the Wuhan Spirit needs to be explored, which is a challenging as well as an exciting exercise. It is challenging because the budding ‘China-India Plus’ is without enough illustrative instances. It excites because it has sprouted from the Wuhan Spirit, pointing to new grounds to break.

In this article, the author argues that although the ‘China-India Plus’ proposal is novel in its format, it shows continuity in terms of underlying expectations and hope. It yet again articulates China and India’s long-cherished desire to use their developmental cooperation to make their strategic relations more stable. The article explains context and rationale of the proposal, provides some necessary informative inputs followed by enumerating gains that the proposal is likely to ensure and challenges it is likely to face. It concludes that although this proposal deserves investment by the two countries, dramatic gains may not be expected in the short-term. Hence, a realistic view is advised.

Context and Rationale

The desire of making strategic relations more stable, through developmental cooperation, stems from the idea that bilateral economic and cultural cooperation cannot only foster material benefits, it can also be exploited to transform the nature of overall relations. The idea promises better strategic relations. It has its roots in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the ideas of *Chindia* and Asian Century appeared in the India-China discourse.⁵ These ideas sought to reclaim Asia’s pre-

⁵ Yashwant Sinha, “Asian Security and China in 2000-2010,” Inaugural Address, The Fifth Asian Security Conference (ASC), Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), New Delhi, January 27, 2003, at

colonial splendour in global geo-economics, resting upon complementarities in India-China economic ties and their collective

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bargaining power in the international economic order. These grand ideas were, in a way, also pushing for 'commercial peace,'⁶ which, at a more immediate security-strategic level, emphasized transformation of relations by "accelerating cooperation" to disincentivise differences. Increasing trade and investment interdependence, making a common

cause on issues of common concern at multilateral fora and creating numerous dialogue mechanisms, have been the modus operandi of this approach.

This approach has yielded mixed results. Trade has indeed increased significantly. Back-of-the-envelope calculations inform that the two countries have signed more than 100 agreements and MOUs, which underline their developmental synergy. Similarly, they are engaging each other in around 40 dialogue formats within the governmental

http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/4161/Inaugural_address_By_External_Affairs_Minister_Shri_Yashwant_Sinha_at_the_Fifth_Asian_Security_Conference_organised_by_the_Institute_for_Defence_Studi (Accessed June 06, 2019); Jairam Ramesh, *Making Sense of Chindia: Reflections on China and India* (New Delhi: India Research Press, 2005), pp. XII-130.

⁶ Matthew A. Castle, "Globalization's Impact: Trade and Investment in China-India Relations" in *The China-India Rivalry in the Globalisation Era*, ed. T.V. Paul (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2019), p. 251.

domain and outside. They have cooperated in the WTO, for reforms in the IMF and on the climate change issue. They are leading members in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).⁷ Their cooperation at multilateral fora has led to a general proposition that even though the two countries might have issues in their bilateral relations, they can still have constructive cooperation at global level.⁸ However, critics point out that trade volume – which is lopsidedly in favour of China and only a fraction in its overall global trade – and low investment figures are not enough to ensure what is envisaged as ‘commercial peace.’⁹ Similarly, a large number of the MOUs signed are not operational. Besides, as China is fast moving away from its developing status, their interaction at multilateral fora may also have limitations.¹⁰ Importantly, the two countries have not been successful in extending their cooperation to their nearby regions.¹¹ Thus, as this view would hold, a series of

⁷ Feng Liu, “China-India Engagement in Institutions: Convergence and Divergence on Global Governance Reforms” in *The China-India Rivalry in the Globalisation Era*, ed. T.V. Paul (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2019), pp. 281-308.

⁸ C. Raja Mohan, “RajaMandala: Speak frankly with China: Delhi needs a more agile—and more open— policy to engage with Beijing,” *The Indian Express*, July 5, 2016, at <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-china-foreign-policy-nsg2893904/> (Accessed April 21, 2017). In this article, Mohan indicated about the growing doubts about maintainability of this proposition.

⁹ Matthew A. Castle, “Globalization’s Impact,” pp. 255-60.

¹⁰ Feng Liu, pp. pp. 281-308.

¹¹ Hu Shisheng and Peng Jing, “The Rise of China and India: Prospects of Partnership” in *Emerging China: Prospects for Partnership in Asia*, ed. Sudhir T.

military and diplomatic stand-offs between 2013¹² and 2017 finally exposed the weakness in this approach. Nevertheless, mitigating impact of the desire for peace together with benefits of globalisation under the dictums that “cooperation can prevail over friction” and “that this world has enough space for the two countries to grow together” has, indeed, ensured tranquillity and stability in relations, for a large part in last two decades. Besides, weaknesses in their developmental partnership apart, significance of their overlapping geo-economic networking cannot be wished away.¹³ One must not forget how the concerns about BRICS Summit in Xiamen, China helped them to tide over the Doklam crisis.¹⁴ Thus, both overstating as well as understating the role of developmental dimensions of bilateral ties in managing the two countries’ strategic relations would be wrong.

Devare, Swaran Singh and Reena Marwah, (London and New York and New Delhi: Routledge, 2012), pp. 348-374.

¹² A major military stand-off had occurred in Laddakh in April 2013 before Modi’s first term and barely a month after Xi became State President in March 2013, which indicates that even if Modi and Xi had to handle much of bad run in relations, causes had been brewing up before their terms. Prashant Kumar Singh, pp. 35-72.

¹³ Matthew A. Castle, “Globalization’s Impact,” pp. 261-263.

¹⁴ Abhijnan Rej, “India’s Clever Use of the BRICS Card in Doklam Standoff,” *LiveMint*, August 31, 2017, at <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/c4ws2jwOqP7ALa7Y0RbC1M/Indias-clever-use-of-the-BRICS-card-in-Doklam-standoff-reso.html> (Accessed June 08, 2019).



Leaders of BRICS nations in Osaka, Japan, in June 2019. (Source: Press Information Bureau, Government of India)

What would be more reasonable to argue is that while there is nothing fundamentally incorrect in this approach, by the military stand-off in Depsang in Ladakh in April 2013, strategic divergence had taken over the spirit of cooperation, and it was clear that this spirit was not able to cope up with the pace of the changing strategic scenario. Cooperation had not acquired as much substance as was expected, and was witnessing stagnation.

Wuhan Summit and the Emergence of ‘China-India Plus’

The Wuhan Summit was a reaffirmation of the longstanding fundamentals of bilateral relations as well as a relook at them “from the strategic and long-term perspective.” It was an acknowledgement that

two countries are not yet another pair of ordinary neighbours but “two large economies and major powers with strategic and decisional autonomy, which have implications of regional and global significance... a positive factor for stability amidst current global uncertainties.” While the need of “a balanced and sustainable” trade and investment on the basis of complementarities was stressed, the two leaders notably emphasized “building on the convergences...in order to create **the broadest possible platform** [emphasis is mine] for the future relationship” as the two countries “have wider and overlapping regional and global interests.” Modi and Xi underscored the two countries’ capacity in “achieving global prosperity,” jointly “facilitating sustainable solutions for global challenges.” Here, relevant is that they underlined that “India and China, given their vast developmental experiences and national capacities, should join hands to take lead in offering innovative and sustainable solutions to challenges faced by humankind in the 21st century.” The two leaders “agreed to pool together their expertise and resources and create a global network dedicated to the challenges”¹⁵ the larger international community faces. This is where, the author points out, that the ‘China-India Plus’ comes from.¹⁶

¹⁵ The paragraph draws on “India-China Informal Summit at Wuhan,” Press Release, Media Centre, India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), April 28, 2019, at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29853/IndiaChina_Informal_Summit_at_Wuhan (Accessed June 08, 2019).

¹⁶ The two countries did not issue any joint communique after the summit. The Foreign Ministry of People’s Republic of China (FMPRC) emphasised that “the two leaders drew a grand blueprint for the China-India comprehensive cooperation” and they “also instructed relevant departments on the two sides to come up with specific working plans and follow-up steps.” “Foreign Ministry

While the aforementioned bits have all along appeared in India-China interactions in some form or other, if one reads these bits, which emerged from the Wuhan Summit, in the backdrop of all that had transpired from 2013 to 2017 on the military and diplomatic fronts between the two countries, they point to a more clearly articulated major power perspective for relations – not merely a bilateral perspective – with a sense of more immediate joint responsibilities towards the international community. Thus, one can argue that in keeping with the long-standing strategic view of cooperation in relations, the ‘China-India Plus’ may be envisaged both as a vehicle of regional development as well as a confidence-building measure or trust-enhancing mechanism of higher order between the two countries in the region. Given that a trust deficit vis-a-vis each other’s objectives and intentions in regional contexts of Central Asia, South Asia, the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean region has run very deep, the ‘China-India Plus’ is a proposal which must be given a serious hearing.

The Examples of the ‘China-India Plus’ Cooperation

As of now, the two countries’ joint training programme for ten Afghan diplomats at the Foreign Service Institute in New Delhi is the only example in this regard. This programme was inaugurated in October

Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference,” May 02, 2018, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1556224.shtml (Accessed June 08, 2019); Also see, “China, India Reach Broad Consensus in Informal Summit,” *Xinhua*, April 29, 2019, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/29/c_137145546.htm (Accessed June 08, 2019).

2018.¹⁷ The intention for China-India cooperation in Afghanistan was declared immediately after the Wuhan Summit last year. Then, it was expected that the two countries will extend their joint assistance to Afghanistan in fields of agriculture, medicine, poverty reduction and capacity-building, where the two countries have proven capacities.¹⁸ Afghanistan was a right choice for initiating 'China-India Plus' as political sensitivities do not come in the way of their cooperation in Afghanistan the way they may be perceived, say, in Nepal, at least from the point of view of India's strategic concerns. Since the two countries suffer the spill over of instability in Afghanistan, they have a reason to jointly wade through, to the extent possible, in Afghanistan to stabilize security situation in that country. Collaborative efforts will increase their manoeuvring space there.

Before Afghanistan, one would, incidentally, recall that India and China cooperated to establish Wind, Tide, Current Measurement System to Enhance Navigational Safety at a Singaporean port under the Cooperative Mechanism of the International Maritime Organization during 2009-10.¹⁹ Thus, even though the two countries have joint

¹⁷ Geeta Mohan, "India, China Begin First Joint Afghan Project," *India Today*, October 16, 2018, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-china-begin-first-joint-afghan-project-1368738-2018-10-16> (Accessed June 09, 2018).

¹⁸ "India, China Likely to Jointly Undertake Projects in Afghanistan," *The Economic Times*, May 07, 2018, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-china-likely-to-jointly-undertake-projects-in-afghanistan/articleshow/64057491.cms> (Accessed June 09, 2019).

¹⁹ Please see, "Cooperative Mechanism", at <http://www.cmsoms.com/?p=td&id=9> (Accessed June 09, 2019). The author thanks Cmde

capacity in “achieving global prosperity” and their vast developmental experiences and national capacities can offer “innovative and sustainable solutions” together to the international community, the instances of ‘China-India Plus’ are scarce.

Possible Gains

One can envisage that this format or mechanism of cooperation has some obvious benefits, which may prove substantial in long term. Firstly, it may ensure greater welfare for developing countries. Secondly, it may as well foster material benefits to the two countries where they can have collaborative commercial projects. Incidentally, ‘China-India Plus’ is in line with China’s advocacy and search for third-party market cooperation. Thirdly, this format may act as a great confidence-building measure at two levels: between India and China and then equally importantly, it will reassure smaller countries in the region vis-à-vis India-China relations. Fourthly, as the two countries display deep divergence when it comes to their connectivity conceptions and initiatives,²⁰ ‘China-India Plus’ can help them to

Abhay Kumar Singh (Retd.), Research Fellow, IDSA, to call his attention to this instance of India-China joint cooperation in Singapore.

²⁰ India has declined to endorse China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) due to its objection to CPEC, which is a part of the BRI. It did not accept the invitation for international BRI Forums in 2017 and 2019. In India’s conception of connectivity, connectivity initiatives and projects should show respect for countries’ sovereignty, should not be unilaterally pushed and should follow equitable revenue model, which does not create debt trap for the recipient countries. In India’s view, the BRI fails to pass these tests. “Official Spokesperson’s Response to a Query on Participation of India in OBOR/ BRI Forum,” MEA, May 13, 2017, at <http://www.mea.gov.in/mediabriefings.htm?dtl/28463/official+spokespersons>

circumvent frictions on this issue. For example, if 'China-India Plus' can be made to be co-present in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) countries, it will be a notable contribution towards stability and prosperity across the regions. While BRI is a Chinese initiative, whereas AAGC is powered by India and Japan. Fifthly, 'China-India Plus' needs not only to flow out to third countries, it should also flow in, meaning a capable third country, say Japan, should be encouraged by the two countries for collaborative projects with them for their own domestic development. The cumulative effect of this format of cooperation, if given a full play, would be that it will reduce trust deficit in India-China relations in the regional contexts to a great extent in the long run.

Identifying the Bottlenecks

However, this format will have to overcome two main difficulties. On the operational side, different bureaucratic cultures and the issue of availability of resources would be a problem this format would have to grapple with.²¹ Secondly, strategic mistrust will play its role in terms of choosing issue-areas of cooperation and the countries for cooperation. Thirdly, Africa has also been alluded as a possible area for 'China-India Plus' cooperation, after Xi and Modi visited Rwanda within 24 hours of

+response +to +a +query +on +participation+of+india+in+oborbri+forum
(Accessed June 09, 2017).

²¹ Instructive in this regard is egregiously slow pace at which the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Corridor has progressed. It has not shown any notable progress. Even though later the India-China divergence over CPEC-BRI may have impacted it too, difference between China's expectations of fast execution of the project and slow decision-making and execution pace in India were too visible all along.

each other's visit on their way to BRIC Summit in South Africa in July 2018.²² However, this author has gathered impression from his participation in deliberations on this topic with his Chinese counterparts that it is South Asia that somehow appeals to their imagination for 'China-India Plus.' After Afghanistan, it is Nepal that is the most indicated country for a possible 'China-India Plus.'²³ Incidentally, Nepal on its part has emerged as a strong votary of China-India-Nepal trilateral cooperation or now 'China-India Plus.'²⁴ However, the Himalayan terrain poses its own challenges for large-scale projects. Engineering has its complications leading to increased financial overheads, and consequently, commercial sustainability and the impact on the local market are difficult to determine. India's strategic concerns also make fruition of any 'China-India Plus' project in

²² Abhishek G Bhaya, "Beijing Moots 'China-India Plus' Cooperation as Xi, Modi Attend BRICS Summit," CGTN, July 5, 2019, at https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d414f314d444d79457a6333566d54/share_p.html (Accessed June 10, 2019).

²³ Also see, Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "China reaches out to India for joint projects in South Asia," *The Economic Times*, October 16, 2018, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/china-reaches-out-to-india-for-joint-projects-in-south-asia/articleshow/66228489.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed June 10, 2018).

²⁴ Prashant Kumar Singh, "Can India Stomach an India–Nepal–China Trilateral?" *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, June 15, 2018, at <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/can-india-stomach-an-india-nepal-china-trilateral/> (Accessed June 10, 2018).

Nepal more complex. If the newly envisaged cooperation format remains South Asia centric, it may not be palatable for India.²⁵

Some Recommendations

To overcome these problems, the format should be experimented and implemented first in more acceptable issue-areas of cooperation in capacity-building programmes in education, culture, health, agriculture, entertainment, combating diseases, disaster risk reduction and mitigation. Later, it can be gradually calibrated in other issue-areas, which require relatively higher degree of confidence. Besides, projects under 'China-India Plus' cooperation should not give the impression of being pushed unilaterally and should be jointly conceptualised. A major critique of BRI has been that it is China's unilateral initiative, without requisite consultation with other likely partner countries and broader stakeholders. In similar vein, willingness and the requirement of third party (recipient or host country for this cooperation) will certainly be the pre-condition for 'China-India Plus.' Moreover, to generate trust, countries should be selected for cooperation from across the regions, not from one particular region. For example, if Afghanistan has been chosen now, next could be Laos, Cambodia or Kazakhstan. Priority should of course be the adjoining regions. This cooperation could be strategically extended to select countries of Africa. When both of them have requisite resources, reach and inclination, they can take more

²⁵ Aishwarya Kumar, "Modi-Xi Wuhan Summit: Will China-Nepal-India Trilateral Corridor Take Shape?" News 18, April 27, 2018, at <https://www.news18.com/news/india/modi-xi-wuhan-summit-will-china-nepal-india-trilateral-corridor-take-shape-1731245.html> (Accessed June 10, 2019).

liberal view for extending their cooperation in a generalised manner. However, one should not miss the larger point that the 'China-India Plus' is envisaged as a special purpose vehicle for cooperation whose objective cannot be just altruistic. The underlying expectations from it is that it would generate and enhance strategic mutual trust between the two countries by jointly working to extend benefits of their capacities and cooperation to less developing countries. Therefore, strategic considerations in selecting countries for cooperation under this format cannot be lost sight of. Selection of Afghanistan as the first target country speaks for itself in this regard. Finally, promoting 'China-India Plus' within the framework of regional organisations should also be given a thought as it will inspire more confidence among the two countries and the selected third country.

Conclusion: The Need of a Realistic Expectation

The 'China-India Plus' idea is worth exploring in its various developmental and strategic dimensions, and it needs to be promoted. However, one should not over-emphasize the role the 'China-India Plus' format can play. It cannot be a panacea for curing strategic mistrust in India-China relations. It should be rather seen in light of the basic idea that continued cooperation and dialogue is always only way forward to transform and enhance the quality of bilateral relations. The answer to trust deficit could only be more cooperation and more dialogue. Thus, it should be seen as one more imaginative addition, which will complement other available formats and methods for enhancing cooperation and deepening mutual trust.



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