

Two suns in the East

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As Modi visits Beijing, let's remember there is space for both India and China's ambitions as global powers.

Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) and President Xi Jinping are making sincere efforts to take India-China bilateral relations to a new high. Their sincerity can be gauged from the fact that Xi decided to visit India in September last year, within a couple of months of the formation of the new government, and Modi's reciprocal visit is taking place in his very first year as PM. The greatest impediment in India-China relations is the trust deficit. By engaging with each other swiftly, the two leaders have demonstrated that they are determined to address and reduce the trust deficit.

We romanticise and sensationalise our relations with China. We expect big ticket announcements and breakthroughs on every high-profile visit. We must not forget that the India-China relationship is the most difficult of bilateral ties. Managing a number of contradictions in it is the real challenge for governments on both sides. In the given geostrategic and geopolitical situation, enhancing mutual trust and establishing a strong working relationship at various levels, right up to the top, is of utmost importance, which the two leaders seem to realise.

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"It is a little naïve to think that the trouble with China was essentially due to a dispute over some territories. It has deeper reasons. Two of the largest countries in Asia confronted each other over a vast border. They differed in many ways. And the test was whether any

one of them would have a more dominating position than the other on border and in Asia itself,” observed Nehru in 1962. That we “differ in many ways” is key to understanding how to manage our relations.

At a time when Modi is embarking on his maiden visit to China as PM, optimism pervades the establishments on both sides. There are reasons for this optimism. On both sides, we have leaders who are perceived by their respective countrymen as popular and strong. After starting on a slightly sticky wicket, Xi quickly overcame obstacles and gained full control over the party and the Central Military Commission, besides the government. He has acquired the image of a strong nationalist leader. Modi too enjoys the reputation of being strong and determined.

There can't be a better opportunity for both the countries to address bilateral issues resolutely and embark on a journey of mutual trust, cooperation and goodwill. Deng Xiaoping once advocated a policy where the two countries set aside the contentious issues and cooperate more on matters of mutual interest and benefit. It suited us in the last two decades. Today, we have fairly good relations in trade and commerce. Bilateral trade has exceeded \$70 billion. Trade relations are improving further with India opening up more avenues for Chinese investments, such as in railways and industrial parks. There is a lot of Chinese interest in the Make in India campaign. Several MoUs are expected to be signed during Modi's visit, to boost investments into India.

The sentiments expressed on both sides reflect optimism and pragmatism. In a recent interview to India Today, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang said: “China is ready to work with India to align our development strategies, reinforce political trust, expand mutually beneficial cooperation and progress together through mutual learning and assistance.” Modi, too, expressed similar sentiments during Xi's visit to India last September, saying: “This is a historic opportunity for the relationship between India and China, filled with vast possibilities. We can start a new era in our relations. If we are sensitive to our opportunities and challenges then I am confident that we will fulfil our responsibility to make it a great success.”

The Chinese have the traditional concept of the “Middle Kingdom”, where China is a superior entity and all other countries inferior. There was a Confucian dictum: “There cannot be two suns in the sky.” China has nurtured great power ambitions for long. Michael Pillsbury, in his book, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*, refers to a warning from military officer Liu Mingfu in *China Dream*. “China's grand goal in the 21st century,” wrote Liu, “is to become the world's No 1 power.” In November 2012, just two weeks after becoming the leader of the Communist Party, Xi visited the National Museum in Tiananmen Square. There, after viewing a grand exhibition called “The Road to Revival,” which recalled China's century of humiliation, beginning with the Opium War of 1840, Xi issued a call for achieving the Chinese dream, or “the great revival of the Chinese nation.”

India, too, has its own ambitions to grow as a “responsible, influential world power”. The US-India joint statement issued during Modi's visit to Washington DC has this to say: “Prime Minister Modi emphasised the priority India accords to its partnership with the

United States, a principal partner in the realisation of India's rise as a responsible, influential world power."

India and China are two major powers in the Asian region today. Deng once observed that a genuine Asian century could be possible only when China and India became developed countries. Both are racing ahead in that direction. In order for this race not to become unhealthy, they must develop a strong understanding on important issues.

Maintaining peace along the LAC, greater transparency in matters like river water data, not allowing visa regimes to vitiate sovereignty questions are important issues for both the countries. There are many areas, at the regional and global level, where our two countries can work together, such as counter-terrorism and joint exploration of energy resources. Of late, China has elevated its "one belt, one road" initiative into a major national mission. However, if those issues are linked to sovereignty questions, there will be great difficulties in working together.

On the issue of counter-terrorism, India and China could cooperate extensively. Li stated recently: "China is ready to deepen counter-terrorism cooperation with India to better safeguard the development and security interests of our two countries." However, this cooperation will succeed only when China revises its strategy of pampering radical elements in Pakistan in the hope that they will not target China. The experience in the Xinjiang region, since the 1990s, shows that this strategy has not worked.

With Modi's visit to China, bilateral relations are expected to strengthen further. One hopes that we succeed in achieving some measured progress in all the outstanding issues. As Deng stated once, "there is enough space for both the countries to prosper".

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