

India, China attempt to reset relations after border crisis

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India and China sought to use last week's BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) heads of government summit and a one-on-one September 5 meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping to "reset" their relations after almost coming to blows during a 73-day border standoff.

However, developments during and since the BRICS summit—most notably Washington's bullying and threats to annihilate North Korea—underscore that the dynamics of world geopolitics are pushing Asia's two largest powers toward open confrontation.

Just six days before the September 3-5 BRICS summit opened in Xiamen, China, New Delhi and Beijing defused their most serious border crisis since the 1962 Sino-Indian war by making staggered troop withdrawals from the Doklam (or Donglang) Plateau. A Himalayan ridge adjacent to the Indian state of Sikkim, Doklam is controlled by China but also claimed by Bhutan.

The crisis began when India, which treats Bhutan as a protectorate, sent troops onto the Doklam Plateau to prevent China from expanding a road. New Delhi claimed the Chinese road-building violated a "standstill agreement" pending mutual determination of where precisely the tri-junction between the three states lies. Beijing countered that India's intervention constituted an unprecedented provocation since its troops were confronting the Chinese army on territory over which New Delhi does not claim sovereignty, but rather, contends belongs to a third country.

Although New Delhi and Beijing both announced on August 28 they were satisfied the Doklam crisis had now ended, they issued no joint statement. Nor did they even use similar language to describe how the dispute had been resolved, a stratagem that enabled each to claim the other had given way.

At last week's summit, Modi, Xi, and their aides sought to downplay their differences on a host of questions, adopting, according to Indian Foreign Secretary, S. Jaishankar, a "forward looking approach." Briefing reporters on Modi's and Xi's more than hour-long tête-à-tête, Jaishankar said the

two leaders had agreed to "shelve differences" and "make more efforts to enhance mutual trust." Referring to the Doklam crisis, Jaishankar said that so as to "ensure" situations like that "which happened recently do not recur," the countries had agreed their "security and defence personnel must maintain strong contacts and cooperation."

At the previous BRICS summit in Goa, India, Modi had accused Pakistan, a close ally of Beijing, of being the "mothership" of global terrorism. While Modi refrained from strident attacks on Pakistan in Xiamen, Beijing—in a "concession" much trumpeted by the Indian press—agreed to denounce two Pakistan-based Islamist groups, the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), as "terrorist" organizations in the summit declaration. Both LeT and JeM are active in the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir and New Delhi has long accused the former of organizing the 2008 Mumbai terrorist atrocity.

India, China and the three other BRICS member states also found common ground in calling on all countries to implement the Paris Climate Change Accord and to guard "against inward-looking policies and tendencies that are weighing on global growth prospects and market confidence." These calls clearly targeted actions of the Trump administration, although the declaration avoided direct reference to Washington.

Both Indian and Chinese officials have said the expansion of economic ties is key to realizing a "reset" of bi-lateral relations. Indo-Chinese trade has expanded dramatically over the past decade, but is currently heavily weighted in China's favour—a point India's media and corporate leaders made repeatedly during the Doklam crisis. In fiscal year 2016-17, China's \$51 billion trade surplus with India was more than four times India's total exports to China.

Following the discussions in Xiamen, Indian Commerce Minister Suresh Prabhu announced last weekend that India and China have established "industry-specific working groups, to promote more exports from India" to China.

The deep tensions between India and China found their clearest expression at Xiamen in the summit statement's

short paragraph dealing with the crisis on the Korean Peninsula. Speaking from Xiamen, Russian President Vladimir Putin warned that the Trump administration's "ramping up" of "military hysteria" in response to North Korea's September 3 nuclear test "could lead to a global catastrophe." Xi and the Chinese leadership, although somewhat more circumspect, have similarly warned of the incendiary character of US threats to launch "preventive war" against North Korea or wage economic warfare through a global cut-off of oil supplies to Pyongyang.

But any reference to the Korean crisis only came in the 44th of the statement's 71 paragraphs, and was limited to condemnation of the North Korean nuclear test and a perfunctory call for the crisis to "be settled through peaceful means and direct dialogue of all the parties concerned."

China and Russia are traditional allies of North Korea, and view Washington's relentless pressure on Pyongyang as ultimately aimed at strengthening the US drive to strategically isolate and encircle them. At the very least, Washington is using the confrontation with North Korea to justify a vast military buildup in north-east Asia, including the deployment, in the name of "ballistic missile defense," of systems that could threaten and target China and Russia.

India, on the other hand, has repeatedly parroted Washington's provocative line on the North Korean crisis over the past two years. Moreover, according to a White House account of a recent conversation between Modi and Trump—an account New Delhi has in no way denied or contradicted—India's prime minister "thanked" the US president "for his strong leadership uniting the world against the North Korean menace." This after Trump had threatened to rain "fire and fury like the world has never seen" on the impoverished country.

India's alignment with Washington on the Korean crisis is entirely in keeping with its transformation under Modi into a veritable frontline stance in the US military-strategic offensive against China.

Over the past three years, New Delhi has dramatically escalated military-strategic cooperation with Washington and its principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia. It has also agreed to open its military bases and ports to routine use by US warplanes and warships and now shares intelligence with the Pentagon on Chinese ship and submarine movements in the Indian Ocean.

Until recently, Beijing sought to dissuade New Delhi from harnessing itself to Washington, principally through offers of investment and cooperation. But the cementing of the Indo-US alliance has caused it to tighten its strategic partnership with India's arch-enemy, Pakistan, leading to a further souring of relations with India.

The Doklam crisis was both an expression of and a new

stage in the deterioration of Indo-Chinese ties. After 10 tense weeks of threats, provocative military deployments and increasing warnings, especially from the Indian side, that there was no guarantee a military exchange could be limited to the border, both sides pulled back.

But the capitalist crisis, the desperate attempt by the US to restore its global hegemony, and the scramble of all the imperialist and great powers for profits, resources and strategic advantage, mitigates against the attempts of New Delhi and Beijing to establish any lasting *modus vivendi* even were that their intent.

Modi flew directly from the BRICS summit to Burma, where India and China are vying for strategic influence. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is visiting India for two days this week to press for a further strengthening of Indo-Japanese military-strategic ties, including through the Asia Africa Growth Corridor, a bilateral Indo-Japanese initiative aimed at countering Chinese influence in Africa.

Shortly after the conclusion of the BRICS summit, Chinese Foreign Ministry representatives were compelled to rebuke India's Army Chief, Lieutenant-General Bipin Rawat, for telling a seminar organized by the New Delhi-based Centre for Land Warfare Studies that India could find itself forced to fight a "two-front war" against Pakistan and China. Rawat said he didn't "see any scope" for "reconciliation" with "our western adversary" (Pakistan) and accused India's "northern adversary," China, with "flexing of muscles," "salami slicing," "taking over territory in a very gradual manner, (and) testing our limits of threshold."



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