

1. Time to Think Small

Context:

- ▶▶ The second **Informal Summit** between Indian Prime Minister and President Xi Jinping will be **held in Chennai**. In this context, we will analyse the India's bilateral relations with China.

India and China:

- ▶▶ India's relationship with China is passing through a difficult moment is not hard to see. The rhetoric about India and China changing the world has always masked the persistent structural problems that hobbled their ties.
- ▶▶ If managing the relationship with China has become the biggest test for Indian foreign policy, the second informal summit is a good occasion to reflect on the trends in Delhi's diplomacy towards Beijing.

Challenges between India and China:

1. The danger of betting that the higher level of engagement, the more significant the results. Like so many other mechanisms before it, the informal summit, too, is proving to be inadequate to cope with the range of structural tensions **that have enveloped the bilateral relationship — from Kashmir to trade and multilateral challenges.**
 2. The lack of enough contact at the highest levels is no longer a problem. In the 21st century, the Indian Prime Minister runs often into the PM or President of China and has talks on the margins of such regional and international settings as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Russia-India-China Forum, BRICS and the G-20. Frequency of talks has not improved the ability to resolve the problems facing the relationship.
 3. Third, the current difficulties between India and China are not due to lack of mutual understanding. The problem is the widening gap in the comprehensive national power of the two Asian giants.
- ▶▶ **China's aggregate GDP, now at about \$14 trillion**, is nearly five times larger than that **of India, hovering at \$2.8 trillion**. China's annual defence spending at \$250 billion is four times larger than that of India. More than the size of the spending, China has outpaced India in the much needed modernisation of its armed forces and higher defence organisation.

- **This power Imbalance Translates into an unpleasant fact on the diplomatic front.** That China is under no pressure to please India. Or, more precisely, it can afford to displease India — whether it is the question of blocking India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group or opposing India's Kashmir move and taking it to the UNSC. That did not change at Wuhan nor will it alter in a big way at Chennai.
4. The persistent belief in Delhi that current tensions in US-China relations might encourage Beijing to make nice to India. That expectation has turned out to be wrong. The deepening crisis in US-China relations has made little difference to Beijing's approach to Delhi. The movement has apparently been in the opposite direction.
- Delhi's overestimation of its leverage with Beijing in the triangular relationship with Washington has unfortunately meant India often chose to voluntarily limit its partnership with the US and its allies.
5. The long-standing presumption in Delhi that cooperation with China on global issues will create the conditions for ameliorating bilateral contentions. This turned out to be wrong on three counts. India's support to China on global issues has not led to Beijing's reciprocation on multilateral issues, such as Pakistan's cross-border terrorism, of interest to India, nor has it made it easier to resolve bilateral disputes.

Way Forward:

- **Recognising the power imbalance with Beijing** should liberate Delhi from the prolonged illusions about strategic parity with China and false hopes about building a new global order with it.
- **India should focus on small and pragmatic steps to narrow differences with China on bilateral issues** — especially the boundary dispute, trade deficit and the development of regional infrastructure.
- Thinking small might offer a long overdue corrective to India's diplomatic tradition of putting the China relationship in a grandiose framework.