

"At the Mamallapuram summit, India must ensure that it does not provoke China, leading it to indulge in 'adventurism'."

The second informal summit between leaders of India and China is scheduled to take place in the second week of October in the coastal town of Mamallapuram, south of Chennai. Among the decisions taken at the Wuhan Summit held in April last year was to hold more such summits, aimed at ensuring "higher levels of strategic communications." The Mamallapuram meet adheres to the Wuhan Summit in letter but one wonders whether in the past 18 months the two leaders did succeed in enhancing strategic communications.

When China agreed to an informal summit in 2018, there was considerable scepticism as to what would be on offer from the Chinese side while agreeing to such a move. China was riding the crest of a wave of achievements, and did not think it needed to make concessions to anyone, least of all India. Since then, however, China has met with certain setbacks — geo-politically and economically — while India, though beset by a host of economic woes, seems better positioned today than in the spring of 2018. It, however, remains to be seen whether it will ensure that this summit is more productive.

Symbolic choice of venue

The choice of Mamallapuram was, perhaps, not as arbitrary as it might seem. If Wuhan was picked by President Xi Jinping as the venue last year to demonstrate China's economic resilience and might, Mamallapuram is symbolic of India's 'soft power'. Mamallapuram, an important town of the erstwhile Pallava dynasty that ruled this part of south India from 275 CE to 897 CE, is renowned for its architecture, widely admired across the world.

Mamallapuram and the Pallava dynasty are also historically relevant, for the earliest recorded security pact between China and India (in the early 8th century) involved a Pallava king (Rajasimhan, or Narasimha Varma II), from whom the Chinese sought help to counter Tibet, which had by then emerged as a strong power posing a threat to China. The Chinese side is unlikely to miss this subtle hint, concerning the changing fortunes of nations and the importance of sustaining relationships.

Informal summits have their use as trust-building exercises. It has to be acknowledged, however, that since the Wuhan Summit, little has changed as far as India-China relations are concerned. Doklam and the disputed border between the two countries remains an issue of concern. Hopes raised at the Wuhan Summit that the two countries would jointly work together on an economic project in Afghanistan have proved to be evanescent. Instead, even as the political situation in Afghanistan deteriorates, China, along with countries like Pakistan, remains more intent than ever on ensuring that India has no role to play there.

Contradictory outlook

Meanwhile, China and India continue to compete and have a contradictory outlook on many strategic and civilizational issues. These include the nature of Asian security, regional stability and the role of the U.S. in the region. The China-Pakistan axis has, if anything, been further cemented — the UN designating Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar as a global terrorist a mere blip in the wider scheme of China-Pakistan relations.

After the Wuhan Summit, many things have changed, altering the circumstances surrounding India-China relations. For instance, relations between China and the U.S. have sharply deteriorated. Apart from the U.S., a vast majority of nations in the West have cooled off towards China. While in 2018, the China-Russia axis appeared to be carving out an exclusive zone of influence in East Asia, by mid-2019, new alignments, including a further strengthening of India-Russia ties, as also a new triangular relationship of Russia, India and Japan, appear to be altering equations in the East Asian region. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has also come under increasing attack, even from countries which previously viewed China as a munificent nation.

China's domestic scene is again marked by heightened anxiety today. The economy is far more fragile than in early 2018, as exemplified by the jitters emanating from China's equity and currency markets, and the decline in growth rates. Internal security concerns such as unrest in Tibet, inroads made by radical extremist groups in Xinjiang and the latest turn of events in Hong Kong are also reinforcing fears about the leadership's ability to control the situation. The relentless attack by the U.S. and President Trump on China's economic practices has only aggravated this mood of pessimism.

China's concerns

India, on the other hand, has reasons to be more optimistic than a year ago. India's relations with the U.S. have attained a new high. Relations with Russia have acquired a fresh dimension, incorporating economics alongside a long-standing military relationship. India's line of credit to develop Russia's Far East has fundamentally changed the nature of India-Russia relations. India's relations with Japan have greatly strengthened. The Quadrilateral (the U.S., India, Japan and Australia) has gained a new lease of life.

All this is certain to make China pause and rethink issues. Additionally, certain recent actions by India are likely to arouse China's suspicions about India's intentions, which could impact the summit outcome. While India's efforts to 'dumb down' the Dalai Lama will have appeased China to an extent, other events in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, where it takes a keen interest, will be seen as a provocation at this juncture. For example, the recent announcement by India of an "all arms integrated" exercise 'codenamed Changthang Prahar (assault)' in a "super high altitude" area near Chushul in eastern Ladakh, featuring tanks, artillery guns, drones, helicopters and troops, as well as para-drops, is almost certain to be read suspiciously by China. Simultaneously, the reopening of the Advance Landing Ground at Vijoynagar in Arunachal Pradesh for the use of military aircraft and a proposed major combat exercise, also in Arunachal Pradesh, in which the new Integrated Battle Groups will be seen in operation will add to, and aggravate, China's concerns.

Anyone familiar with the way the Chinese mind works will recognise that the concatenation of circumstances spelt out here is almost certain to make China even more intransigent as far as its negotiating stance is concerned. India, hence, needs to proceed with utmost caution, lest China reacts in a manner that would undermine the 'Wuhan spirit'. India must ensure that it does not provoke China to the point where it would be inclined to indulge in 'adventurism'.

Treading with caution

As part of the preparations for the summit, Mr. Modi's advisers would be well advised to try and arrive at a multi-faceted understanding of China and the Sinophone world in 2019. Achieving a more holistic understanding of China's sense of itself is even more important today than in 2018.

Blowing his 'conch' well ahead of the 70th anniversary of the republic, President Xi has already begun talking of the "great struggle" needed to build a new China. He is obliquely seeking a reversion to the Maoist period of "struggle to achieve victory." For India-based China experts, it may be worthwhile to decipher how this translates in terms of international relations. In the meantime, it would be best to adhere to the dictum, the medium is the message.

India can try and seek answers on how to deal with today's China, from the "wisdom of the orient." Reading up on treatises such as Sun Tzu's 'Art of War' would help. "Subduing the enemy without fighting" has been a recurrent theme in Chinese thinking, and while informal summits have their uses, it is imperative not to overlook this aspect. China's efforts are more than likely to be directed towards 'disruption', primarily concentrating on disrupting the strategic alliances that India has forged, or strengthened, recently.

If India does not proceed with care and caution, the Mamallapuram summit could well prove to be a step back from Wuhan. With preparations and proper handling, the forthcoming meet could, on the other hand, provide India's leaders with a realistic estimate as to where India-China relations are headed.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements in the context of India and China-

1. The 2018 Wuhan summit was held to ensure a high level of strategic communication.
2. The second informal dialogue held in Mamallapuram in 2019 is important for the relationship between the two countries.
3. Reopening of Advance Landing Ground at Vijayanagar in Arunachal Pradesh in which the newly Integrated Battle Groups will practice which will have impact on the relationship of the two countries

Which of the statements given above is / are incorrect?

- (a) 1 and 2 (b) 2 and 3
(c) 1 and 3 (d) None of the above

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

Q. 'Why is the proposed Mamallapuram Summit between India and China important for both countries?'

According to you, which issues need to be given priority in this conference? Discuss

(250 Words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 4 Oct., is 1 (c).