

# Reflecting on Chinese and Indian Negotiation Styles

Written by Oorja Tapan

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OORJA TAPAN, JUL 2 2022

Today, China is proving to be India's biggest security dilemma – be it in the Indo-Pacific or on the land frontier. The era of China's 'peaceful rise' is, practically, seeming to be over; as seen by its 'wolf-warrior diplomacy' phase kicking in under Xi Jinping's rule. There is a need for India to understand Chinese negotiators better. The government of India has had its fair share of negotiations with the Chinese officials since independence of the two nations – be it the recognition of People's Republic of China by Government of India in December 1949, the Agreement on trade between India and Tibet region of China in 1954, Chinese reaction to Indian nuclear tests in 1998, China's formal recognition of Sikkim in 2005, setting up of special representative mechanism for border negotiations since 2013 (and so on). The challenge of mutual understanding becomes great between the two countries – not only due to differences in terms of capabilities (military or economic) but also due to differing perceptions, approaches and international postures. Culture might also play a role in contributing towards a mismatch between Indian and Chinese negotiations. However, such cultural differences play a greater role between the West and the Chinese on the negotiation table.

Indian and Chinese cultures both have a greater focus on 'the collective', rather than the 'individualistic' Western societies. But, Indian civilisation goes a step further in balancing both individual and collective interests. Most of the culture-based negotiation style assessments are made by Western scholars. For example, when an American or European instrument to measure assertiveness in negotiation is translated into Japanese, it retains Western idea of assertiveness. A Japanese concept of assertiveness that included avoidance as an adaptive strategy could be easily overlooked, labelled as unassertive because of cultural assumptions about the natures of assertion and avoidance (LeBaron, 2003). Due to the dearth of balanced, intercultural and good studies deploying a multitude of currencies in developing such research itself (as well as an absence of a multicultural team to carry it out), any generalisations post such research are, usually, limited.

This paper seeks to focus on the informal summits at Wuhan (2018) and Mammallapuram (2019) to analyse the nature of Chinese negotiation style with the Indians. This paper also divulges in to corroborate any pattern in the Chinese nature of 'psychological warfare' with India and its other neighbours to keep testing waters. Also, this paper hopes to decode possible solutions for the changes required in Indian negotiation style with the Chinese to further improve its standing on the global high table.

### The Chinese Style of Negotiation

The Chinese people are bound by four threads of culture throughout their business or political negotiation style – Agrarianism, Confucian Morality (combined with Taoism), Chinese pictographic language style and finally, a wariness about foreigners (Graham and Lam, 2003). The roots of Chinese culture can be traced to their traditional agrarian roots of peasant farming for millennia. It is communal, (not individualistic) and familial hierarchy binds the community together. Survival depends on group cooperation, loyalty and harmony. Many of China's city dwellers were raised in the country and thus, they have retained their agrarian values. Similarly, the second factor of morality based upon the Confucius benevolent moral code (of 2000 years) and Lao Tsu's concept of 'yin yang' shaped the traditional Chinese thought.

Confucius defined five cardinal relationships: between ruler and ruled, parents and children, husband and wife, older

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and younger brothers, and friend and friend. All the former four relationships were strictly hierarchical. The ruled—wives, children, and younger brothers—were recommended to trade submission for the benevolence of their rulers—husbands, parents, and older brothers. Rigorous observance of such hierarchy in society generated social harmony, the remedy for the civil war of Confucius's time. The two forces of Yin (feminine, passive and dark) and Yang (masculine, active and light), as devised by Lao Tsu in his doctrine of Taoism, are opposing yet complementary forces. The main focus was to find 'the way' or 'Tao', instead of the final truth (opposite to what, usually, most Americans prefer to arrive at the goal/truth, with very little concern of the means). This represents a way of compromise in life – settlements of political, social or commercial nature. Such a middle path can also be attributed to the Buddhist political thought in India- of devising the 'golden mean'. However, Indian cultural values transcend deeper into social and individual morality – also venturing out to look for 'the truth' (as Vedantic traditions show), and not just 'a way'.

Chinese negotiators are more concerned with the process than the goal. The best compromises are derived only through the ritual back-and-forth of haggling. This process cannot be cut short and a compromise allows the two sides to hold equally valid positions. The method of 'Haggling' is also followed by Indians in their 'Neti-Neti' approach- as there are many versions of the truth. However, in India, when there is a question of absolute truth/atman/atomism of the individual soul, nothing else matters in the world. The Chinese look at the 'way' as the modus vivendi; however, India has a very strong sense of moral anchoring even in politics, essence of national interest expressed in ethical terms, broadly, as quoted by ex-Indian diplomat, Vijay Nambiar.

Chinese thinking tends toward a more holistic processing of information- due to their pictographic language style; as psychological studies show. Chinese children learn to memorise thousands of pictorial characters because, in Chinese, words are pictures rather than sequences of letters. This way, they tend to look at the bigger picture much better than most Westerners, who memorise Roman numbers and letters during childhood, thereby, being more adept at focussing on the details, than holistic information. Finally, a general sense of cynicism towards foreigners is also present in Chinese culture due to a history of invasions and the more recent, 'century of humiliation' which has now evoked a stronger sense of expansionist Chinese foreign policy since the last decade to compensate for that humiliation. Thus, constant mistrust, deceit and deception are common strategies followed by the Chinese during negotiations- as delineated in their 36 stratagems.

Former Foreign Secretary of India, Vijay Gokhale pointed out the differences in the negotiation style of India and China in his latest book, "The Long Game: How the Chinese negotiate with India". He mentioned how the approaches and perceptions differ on both sides – India's approach is ahimsa (inspired by India's non-violent freedom struggle) and negotiation, while the Chinese do not shy away from taking things by force.

Throughout the 1950s, India believed that both countries had shared the colonial experiences or experiences of colonialism and both the Asian civilisations could have shaped the post war order. However, such a perception was not shared by China. The Chinese considered India a subordinate civilization, putting it in the imperialist British camp or saw it a junior in the Western camp. This mismatch in attitudes and perceptions led to misreading of China's intentions and thus, India submitted crucial cards without even playing them. For instance, recognizing China immediately with no demands in return and giving up the issue of whether India should recognize Taiwan as an independent country or second China, made China gain an upper hand in the beginning itself. India was unable to read the Chinese Communist party back then and thus, could not leverage its relationship with the US and USSR; leading to the 1962 fiasco.

One mistake the other countries are making with respect to negotiating with China; as given in the book 'The Hundred Year Marathon', is going in with false assumptions on China. M. Pillsbury debunked such assumptions in his book and pointed out, for example, that engagement does not mean cooperation for China- the Chinese actually engage only for the other party to reveal its bottom-line position. Another misplaced expectation from the Clinton administration to all the following US administrations is that Capitalism will come to China, they will join the WTO, markets, foreign investment and then 'democratic China' will occur; but it will never happen – as a matter of fact, what China actually has with all this is 'authoritarian resilience'. Also, China is like a 'fragile flower'- this assumption is again a false one, propagated by the so-called 'liberal lobby' that if no concessions are given to China, then

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hardliners will come in. But this has also proven to be wrong in recent years- the Communist Party in China has shown more and more obstinacy. The last mistake is to presume that 'China is like us (Westerners-USA)' and wants to be like us' – it is unlikely that China wants to be like anybody else. Unless negotiators do not fall into such traps, Indians and others will be able to take a firm stand.

## Can Informal Summits really work?

The 2018 Wuhan summit between India and China was called many things by experts: from a 'game changer' to a much required 'reset' in Indian-China relations, post the Doklam standoff. It generated expectations in the two nations that they will make sure of zero future clashes due to miscalculation and errors. While the entire summit emphasised on the interaction of the two leaders, there is not much information out in the public domain about what really transpired. Both sides held delegation-level talks and issued press statements underscoring the importance of Sino-India relations in the regional and global arena. Both sides' press releases also, again, delineated their own 'maturity to handle issues through peaceful negotiations'. The Wuhan Informal summit was billed as a 'heart-to-heart' strategic communication between the two nations on a new track.

Before the Wuhan summit, former foreign secretary of India Vijay Gokhale visited China in order to probably set pace for the informal summit in April, 2018. Thus, the Wuhan summit was not entirely unstructured and it was seen as a reward to Gokhale's claims made during his meet in February 2018 (Joshi, 2018). He had informed the Chinese that India would abjure from using the Tibet card similar to previous four years and it would not intervene militarily in Maldives (given its political instability back then- China also had interests in the country).

After this 'informal get-together', top leaders from the two countries planned to meet more frequently, overlooking the constrictions of protocol. In the international community, the summit aimed to establish the two nations' ideal of maturity and political will to come out of troubled waters, no matter what.

In practical terms, the Wuhan meet established that the two countries would like to retain, as per their press releases, their respective strategic and decisional autonomy. A restatement of India's 'strategic autonomy' was also signalled at the Wuhan summit, given its recent closeness with the USA. China's media hailed the two-day 'informal summit' as a 'major chance' to lift strained ties. Long Xingchun, as strategic scholar for the hawkish Global Times wrote that China should have used the summit to highlight to India that it never 'wished to besiege India in its neighbourhood' as China never really saw India as an opponent, China should remind India of staying away from an 'Asian NATO' and the fragility in ties and mistrust should be dealt with. Another Chinese expert Yi Fan suggested that both were at a crucial stage of modernisation and thus both can achieve their respective goals together -the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation and the vision of New India.

As per both Indian and Chinese sources, the Wuhan 'informal' summit did not have a set agenda and no pre-negotiated joint documents. It was supposed to be a free-wheeling discussion so as to help in "strategic communication" at the highest level. However, even in case of formal summit level meetings, there are not necessarily pre-scripted agendas present always- the agenda can be flexible as the official discussion proceeds.

The Modi-Xi summit in Mamallapuram was more inclined towards an international publicity bonanza for the leaders of the two of the most populous countries in the world (Parthasarthy, 2019). Mamallapuram, the site of the ancient Tamil Kingdom from which traders set sail for China centuries ago, was chosen as the backdrop to also highlight cultural, civilisational and tourism ties between the two nations. But one needs to be cautious in assessing the impact of these summits on China's approach to India. India's decision to revoke Article 370 in August 2019 and China's adverse posture in the United Nations since then provided the backdrop for the Mammallapuram meeting (Gurjar, 2019). However, just like the last summit at Wuhan, whether this summit led to any real progress continues to be an open question, as Galwan valley clashes ensued in 2020 itself, during a full-blown pandemic.

## The Core Problems in any India-China negotiation

While there is a range of problems that muddle the India-China relationship—Masood Azhar issue (now resolved),

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NSG, Sino-Pakistan relations and India-US ties—it is imperative that the two countries concentrate on dealing with the core concern, i.e., the disputed border issue (Joshi, 2018). Both nations tend to adjourn any resolutions on this primary issue while trying to reinforce the bilateral ties.

It has been contended in the dominion of international relations that this issue is a residual problem from history and can be set aside while the two countries work on developing their partnership. However, the border issue keeps poisoning the relationship—as is evident from the series of face-offs in Depsang in 2013, Chumur in 2014, Doklam in 2017 and Galwan in 2020. Thus, this renders relationship-building efforts and confidence building measures ineffectual.

Strategic communications are necessary as the issue of border dispute settlement has remained mostly constant over the years. Technical solutions like Special representative mechanism, India-China hotline at the level of Director General of Military Operations (DGMO), strategic guidance for CBMs can reduce the risk of confrontation and war, but they cannot entirely eliminate them.

The bane of Indian (democratic) negotiations is establishing chemistry and one-to-one/personal ties with the top leaders (this has been happening since Nehruvian era). However, such methods work in China only when the strategic problems on ground are resolved- all the details are to be worked out at the lower-level officers. As noticed in post Galwan discussions also, unless the nitty-gritties are discussed, top level decision-makers do not interfere- final decisions, obviously, are made with the top-level authorities; but the details have to be worked out beforehand only. This fact is often ignored by most Westerners and Indian negotiators.

The leaders in China normally talk in general terms on principles, but at the working level of key negotiators, they push at a very aggressive and direct level. When they are not sure of anything, they keep quiet; however, silence is not acquiescence for them, as pointed by ex-diplomat Vijay Nambiar. India has misread Chinese signals in 1950s. Most of the times, they are not ready with their stances; continuing to formulate their positions and making the other side reveal their true positions in the meanwhile. Once they are ready, they push for their view to be upheld as aggressively as possible and make no adjustments. Pre-negotiating concessions take place in order to create a good climate of negotiations for the other party- however, as the Chinese position becomes well-formulated, they have no idea of 'giving in' ever. Mostly, China makes negative clarifications- like 'what they don't want to see happen', 'what they don't like' etc.

What they actually would like to see happen or what they are striving for usually comes at the very end, when the Chinese have established their control and very less leeway is left for the other side to prize away a thing. The only place where they could not do so was the issue of 'Senkaku Islands' with Japan- in such a scenario, when the Chinese fail to gain control, they become extra-vociferous, berating the other side for violating common international principles etc. 'India has its own version of Sama, Dama, Danda and Bheda – but our attitudes in diplomacy are verifiable nonetheless and we stand by what we say', as quoted by ex- Indian diplomat Vijay Nambiar. The Chinese also talk about credibility – but they are credible in a very technical sense of the word- usually not necessarily lying, but the mist of ambiguity is present in their discussions. They allow other nations to take lead- e.g., USA in case of Disarmament and Chinese side with whatever the larger public/popular opinion is- playing it safe.

Informal summits can work, if there is an overall understanding of especially the positives. Even during Xi-Modi meet before Mammallapuram summit, Xi himself enumerated the five points to guide the relationship- better communications, expanding investments, consciousness of cultural ties, multilateral cooperation and finally, accommodation of core interests. Now, the core interests of both sides' understanding are different, and the Chinese did not clarify much during both summits – just made broad mentions of trade, 'moving together' etc.

## Future Options for India to negotiate with China

The Chinese misread India's determination to defend its core interests at the LAC- both during Doklam and Galwan. Simply holding high level discussions, top-leaders' chemistry etc. will not work if the problem areas are not resolved. Chinese would not allow chemistry to resolve major disagreements. After Galwan, India discovered this fact and

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decided to go through all 15 levels of discussions and should display patience. India has to cope with China, which is five times India's economy – so it makes it difficult to formulate its coping strategies for internal balancing. But India needs to show its military, political, economic and strategic level of alternatives and alignments for external balancing – e.g. with USA, Japan, Australia, France, ASEAN, Vietnam, etc. and India will be able to improve its comprehensive national strength as well as have the guts to showcase it.

China tests waters with almost all nations – with USA on Taiwan etc, with Japan on Senkaku islands, with its ASEAN neighbours in South China Sea etc. This is not specific to India. Chinese had a socialist and earning/low-profile orientation throughout the 1950s till 1970s; despite of its UNSC P5 membership. The major change in Chinese diplomacy came in with Deng Xiaoping era and especially due to its rapid economic growth, primarily witnessed in Hu Jintao years. With Xi Jinping, the Chinese growth was perceived and noticed everywhere around the world. They have had their problems with Japan and ASEAN nations earlier as well; yet they stuck to their 'old school'/ tried and tested traditional Chinese strategy of deception or the '36 stratagems'. The wolf warrior diplomacy and more aggressive attitudes in China's negotiations have emerged with Xi Jinping rule in recent years given its economic expanse; thereby contributing to its militaristic adventurism in SCS and Indo-Pacific. As the Chinese interests go worldwide, particularly BRI etc, China has become more and more zero-sum in its approach/diplomatic attitudes.

Thus, informal summits do not seem to work as long as China remains engaged in testing waters with India, applying psychological warfare (pressure tactics and propaganda etc. to check nationalist sentiments and muscular response to any Chinese incursion on borders and elsewhere – K Natwar Singh called such Chinese actions as 'propaganda – psychological warfare'. With India's nuclear tests in 1998, many experts believed that India came onto the level of parity with China in terms of such psychological warfare as well as countering China's position as the 'sole responsible nuclear power in Asia and global nuclear diplomacy').

India is walking on the tightrope of C. Raja Mohan's "Congagement" with China- Confrontation plus engagement or as Prof. R. Rajagopalan puts it, as "evasive balancing". India should not look at quantitative matching of capabilities as arms race is out of the question. But qualitative matching should take place to increase its minimal deterrence credibility.

## Conclusion

Despite the so-called 'Wuhan spirit', China had not addressed India's core concerns on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, membership of Nuclear Suppliers' Group and market access for Indian goods in China. The Mamallapuram summit again made for good optics for both Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi (Gurjar, 2019), but as expected, there was no tangible outcome to both 'Wuhan spirit' and 'Chennai Connect'.

Chinese strategies towards South Asia have been designed by their insecurities regarding the control over Tibet. This remains their 'core concern' as part of its geostrategic plan of Palm and Five Fingers strategy (Mao Zedong's foreign policy to treat Tibet as China's right hand palm, with five fingers on its periphery: Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh, and thus, its China's responsibility to 'liberate' them to gain stronghold as part of their 'Middle Kingdom Complex' to overcome its 'century of humiliation'). Beijing must ask itself whether its actions—within Tibet and the 1962 war against India—have been helpful or detrimental to its goals (Joshi, 2018). In the past, China has offered to swap claims with India: Aksai Chin for Arunachal Pradesh. However, in recent decades, its position has been to deny that India has any legitimate claim in Aksai Chin as well (Saran, 2017).

Kong Xuanyou during the summits, stated that China did not have any major difference with India vis-à-vis interconnectivity. He said, 'if India does not like the expression 'Belt and Road', China will not push for its acceptance'. These statements appeared generous, although they still did nothing to assuage India's concerns regarding the territorial encroachments via CPEC in a disturbed zone.

Certainly, such informal meetings of this kind act as step towards mutual reassurance. They signal an outward willingness to sit down at the same negotiating table for discussing existing problems; prioritising diplomacy even amidst tensions. Prof. Shen Dingli, currently one of China's leading foreign affairs experts, was carefully neutral in his

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then interview (which is quite true even for 2022). He himself emphasised that summits such as these neither hurt nor help relations as they stand.

Indeed, prior informal summits did not set any winning precedents – both China’s informal meetings with USA failed, in 2013 (with Obama, cybersecurity acted as a hiccup), and in 2017 (for Trump, trade was the bugbear), because ‘reality did not keep pace with optics’. What’s more, in 2013, while Modi and Xi were pleasantly sharing a *jhoola* (swing) in Gujarat, Chinese troops were crossing the border (Basu, 2018).

For India, the border remains at the heart of its relationship with China. The official press release had a loophole when it states that peaceful discussions are the way forward, ‘bearing in mind the importance of respecting each other’s sensitivities, concerns and aspirations’. This is clearly not possible when the two nations are not on the same page regarding their ‘core concerns’. Nor did the two leaders go into “any specifics” about the issue of J&K, Sino-Pakistan relations, CPEC, Jaish-e-Mohammad chief, Masood Azhar, NSG bid, border tensions etc. China also stated on its own that the issue of Tibet was also not discussed and India continues to retain its previously held position. Without going into the “specifics”, how can a reset take place? In his interview, Shen Dingli, when asked if India should relax its opposition to the BRI, was brutally honest. ‘If I were Indian, I would not soften my position’. In technical terms, a ‘reset’ implies a complete start from scratch (Basu, 2018). In the case of India and China, there is too much history for any reset to take place so easily.

*This article is based on interview excerpts with former Indian diplomat, Vijay Nambiar.*

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