

EU-India Synergies

Four common fronts for cooperation

The deaths of twenty Indian and an undisclosed number of Chinese soldiers in a violent face-off along the India-China Line of Actual Control, on 15 June 2020, is an inflexion point in the seventy-year relationship between Asia's largest modern states. A return to the old structure is no longer possible. To understand this, it is important to see the India-China relationship in historical context.

Relations with China have always been important for India – especially in a post-colonial Asian order. India's vision of friendship was based on shared interests, but Communist China's outlook towards India was driven solely by its own concerns: their need to consolidate central rule in Tibet and Xinjiang, and their efforts to fend off international isolation and American hostility. It led, on India's part, to strategic miscalculation, war and a freeze in relations for a generation until 1988.

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the two sides decided on the complete normalization of relations along with a common understanding to address historical issues – like the boundary question – in parallel. Yet a new dynamic began to take shape as China's economy grew to four times the size of India's. Agreements to maintain peace and tranquillity, concluded in the 1990s, were not followed through. China built up its military along the Line of Actual Control, and on 15 June



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2020, that delicate arrangement toppled over into a heap of rubble. The cause for that lies not with India, but with China.

Under President Xi Jinping, China regards itself as the dominant regional power with no competitor in Asia. Especially since 2013, China's actions contrast the frequently expressed disinterest to seek hegemony. India-China relations have become a sub-set of China's global strategy to replace the United States as the global hegemon. The incident of 15 June 2020 is also, however, a sign that China is still struggling to find the proper balance between

applying too much pressure, which might cause India to tip over to the US side, and not enough pressure which might complicate the situation in their vulnerable south-western periphery.

This means India must work with others, including Europe. India and the EU, along with other like-minded partners in Asia and elsewhere, need to consult and shape policy on multiple fronts.

First, on the multilateral front, India and the EU should begin discussions on the premise that the world is a single unit and both have interests everywhere. Geography and distance should cease to be important if we want to ensure jointly that China plays by global rules set through multilateral negotiation.

Second, on the domestic front, the two sides must exchange views on how China influences the internal situation in other countries. Chinese protestations that they are not seeking to export their model of governance to other countries does not mean that they are not trying to undermine political systems elsewhere. India and the EU need to work together to strengthen democracies and promote values. The Alliance for Multilateralism, launched in April 2019, is a beginning. More needs to be done to make this movement global.

Third, in terms of the global economy, the question of decoupling is complicated for both India and the EU. The EU has invested money and technology in enormous quantities in China. However, two options should be on the table for India-EU discussions. First, a resolve to diversify away from an overreliance on any single market should be a common factor, and thus a building block for greater EU investment and more trade with India. Second, both should avoid a new 'coupling' with China to the extent feasible in the new areas, beginning with 5G and artificial intelligence. This requires a synergy in R&D and manufacturing. Therefore, the EU should see India as more than a market

The fourth front is the realm of the military and intelligence cooperation. The EU-China strategic outlook of 2019 said that Chinese maritime claims and increased military capabilities present security issues for the EU already in the short to medium

perspective. If the EU genuinely means this, then a strategic relationship between India and the EU becomes vital. Yet major players, including Germany, Poland, Spain and Italy, have a marginal political presence in the Indo-Pacific region. Can the EU stick to this position, when the Chinese Navy is foraying into the Mediterranean- or Baltic Sea?

India looks to Germany and France to lead efforts, not military but in the form of a multilateralism of security, to build greater India-EU synergies in all four above-mentioned fronts. While Germany is India's major economic partner, a convergence at the strategic level and on global issues still eludes India and Germany. If China has given up on multipolarity because it is seeking its unipolar dream, it is up to India and the EU – including Germany – to work in ways that ensure that the world remains multipolar. ✕

What is your view of China's growing influence?

