

India can get a lot out of Bishkek — if PM Modi can remember lessons China taught Nehru

It would be in India's best interests to avoid mentioning Pakistan at SCO summit and hope Modi-Jinping meeting builds on Wuhan spirit.

[SESHADRI CHARI](#) Updated: 14 June, 2019 11:29 am IST



PM Narendra Modi with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. | Twitter | @narendramodi

The Narendra Modi-Xi Jinping [meeting](#) at the SCO summit at Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan was pitch-perfect in terms of optics. It comes nearly two years after the [Doklam crisis](#) and a year after the moderately successful [Wuhan summit](#).

But New Delhi needs to be careful about the advances of the notorious People's Liberation Army deep into Indian territory to enact a repeat of 1962. Prime Minister Modi's India should not forget the important lessons from Jawaharlal Nehru's [disastrous rendezvous](#) with China.

Beyond optics

The 19th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit is Modi's first important multilateral engagement in his second term. While the media would likely keep an eye on the body language of Modi and Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, the world's attention, especially that of the United States, would be focussed on the outcome of Modi's meetings with Chinese Premier Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Both these meetings have their own significance. The outcome of PM Modi's first interaction with Xi Jinping in his second term will hope to take forward New Delhi's relationship with Beijing from where the two leaders last left it – at the Wuhan summit – and not from where the two countries stood at just months before that – in a tense position at the border in Doklam. But Modi must keep in mind that both the scenarios took place under his watch, in 2018. And so, New Delhi has more than just the history of 1962 to learn its lessons from.

Modi's meeting with Russia's Putin similarly assumes importance because it comes after the much-publicised S-400 deal, which has been frowned upon by the White House under President Donald Trump.

The SCO summit, among other things, will discuss two important subjects –trade and terrorism – without actually addressing the real problem on both counts: Pakistan. In fact, none of the member countries are likely to name anyone or hold those responsible for terror-related activities. This simply means that Modi won't be naming Pakistan for sponsoring terrorism against India.

Avoid Pakistan

New Delhi had a tough time convincing Beijing on the need to forge a stronger rule-based structure against terrorism. Even though China reluctantly withdrew its veto on the designation of Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar as a global terrorist by the

United Nations, it will never respect New Delhi's [objections](#) on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

China needs Pakistan because its prestigious CPEC, which passes through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, is vital for its plans to make an entry into Indian Ocean through Gwadar. The strategic and trade agenda of China is best served by Pakistan, especially its army, which is protecting Chinese assets and security interests in POK area as well as the troubled Baluchistan.

It would be a great diplomatic victory if Modi is able to get the SCO member countries to condemn the human rights violations in Baluchistan. For China, though, therein lies a problem: besides its need to side with Pakistan, any discussion on human rights violations exposes Beijing to its [ruthless suppression](#) of Uyghur Muslims in its own backyard, in Xinjiang province.

At the same time, it would also be in the best interests of India to avoid any mention of Pakistan and deny it importance, a cause to which Islamabad helps through the abject state of its economy and thus bringing little value to the SCO.

The China factor

The summit also coincides with the increased acrimony between the US and China on trade issues. The trade war between the two countries concerns not just commercial issues like tariff but the larger issue of being in the race for global supremacy.

India needs to play an important role in strengthening regional trade and cooperation mechanisms, but New Delhi should not be seen as being supportive of a possible China-Russia axis against the US.

China under Xi Jinping has emerged as an economic superpower and is using its economic prowess and geographical contiguity to make huge inroads into Central Asia, Eurasia and Europe.

A look at the 8,445-km-long transcontinental motor road corridor linking China (Lianyungang) and Russia (Saint Petersburg) proves the point. For China, the "[Europe-Western China](#)" corridor is an important part of the revival of the [Silk Road](#) that linked Europe to Asia. More importantly, the border town of Horgos in Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region is already complete and will help increase the [volume of freight](#) between China and Europe exponentially. About 48 Chinese cities have reportedly launched 65 [freight train routes](#) connecting with 14 countries and more than 40 cities in Europe, completing nearly 13,000 railway trips. International trains from Urumqi can reach Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and go up to The Netherlands in 16 days.

India's position, and its roles

Many of India's immediate and distant neighbours may secretly feel uncomfortable with an aggressive and ambitious China but when it comes to economic diplomacy and project execution, New Delhi comes nowhere near Beijing.

India is seen as a benign power and a stable and reliable partner in the region. New Delhi's [growing international clout](#) also makes it an attractive economic partner for many SCO member states and observers.

Even SCO members would like New Delhi to match Beijing's proactive approach but PM Modi will have to tread cautiously to avoid encountering another uncomfortable issue to tackle.

Expanding markets call for satiating hunger for energy and India needs to secure its energy supplies from as many sources as possible. Five countries of Central Asia play an important role in securing that [energy security](#). Besides oil and gas, New Delhi is eager

to import uranium from Uzbekistan while we have been getting supplies from Kazakhstan as well.

But back home, Modi 2.0 will have to focus on issues such as Make in India, ease of doing business, and facilitate more investments. The vast stretch of South East Asia is waiting for the success of the Look East and Act East policies, which only New Delhi can guarantee.

India also has greater opportunities to expand its economic and strategic outreach in Africa through Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, IBSA Dialogue Forum, and strengthening BRICS and BIMSTEC.

New Delhi's acceptance in the region and the global geopolitical arrangement is clearly visible and much appreciated. India has successfully addressed some of the issues to ensure an external environment that is favourable to economic growth and development. But to consolidate this gain and secure our strategic interests, New Delhi will have to ensure a peaceful and prosperous periphery – first in its immediate neighbourhood to begin with, and then expand it to cover the region.

The author is former editor of 'Organiser'. Views are personal.

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