

Why did China agree to Wuhan?

Anything which arrests India's potential drift towards the US and its allies is good for China



RODERICK MACFARQUHAR
IN CONVERSATION WITH
ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY

RODERICK MACFARQUHAR, Leroy Williams Research Professor of History and Political Science at Harvard is a leading international authority on Chinese politics. He was born in pre-Partition Punjab and has maintained a life-long interest in India. These two sides of his intellectual personality — appreciation of India and scholarly depth on China — put him in a unique position to interpret President Xi Jinping's Wuhan summit with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He spoke at length to ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY, director, Center for Contemporary South Asia, Brown University, and contributing editor for *The Indian Express*, in his office at Harvard. Excerpts:

There are several puzzling aspects to the Wuhan Summit. Even if one believes, as is being argued in some circles, that India asked for an informal summit, why would China agree to have one?

I think Xi Jinping regards India as a potential ally of the US and Japan against China. India by itself is not a serious problem. The border is in control of the Chinese if they wish to exercise it, simply because they are on higher slopes and have more troops there. But anything which arrests India's potential drift towards the US and its allies is good for China. The Chinese were perhaps quite happy to have an informal summit: they could hear what Modi had to say and placate him a little. It was no skin off their nose. It was not in Beijing where they might have had to roll out the red carpets. And being informal, no documentary evidence was required for any agreements of great significance.

So an informal summit was a low-cost, high-benefit option for China.

That is right. And Modi, I would suspect, also wanted some kind of assurance that whatever problems he has with Pakistan until the 2019 elections, China as Pakistan's benefactor did not jump up and down on its border, and threaten India.

Why Wuhan? Any great significance?

Not much, except for the fact that it is a major industrial city, has been for a long time, and the 1911 Republican revolution started there. An informal summit would normally take place in a place other than Beijing or Shanghai.

If you look at the statements made by Xi after the summit, he emphasised two

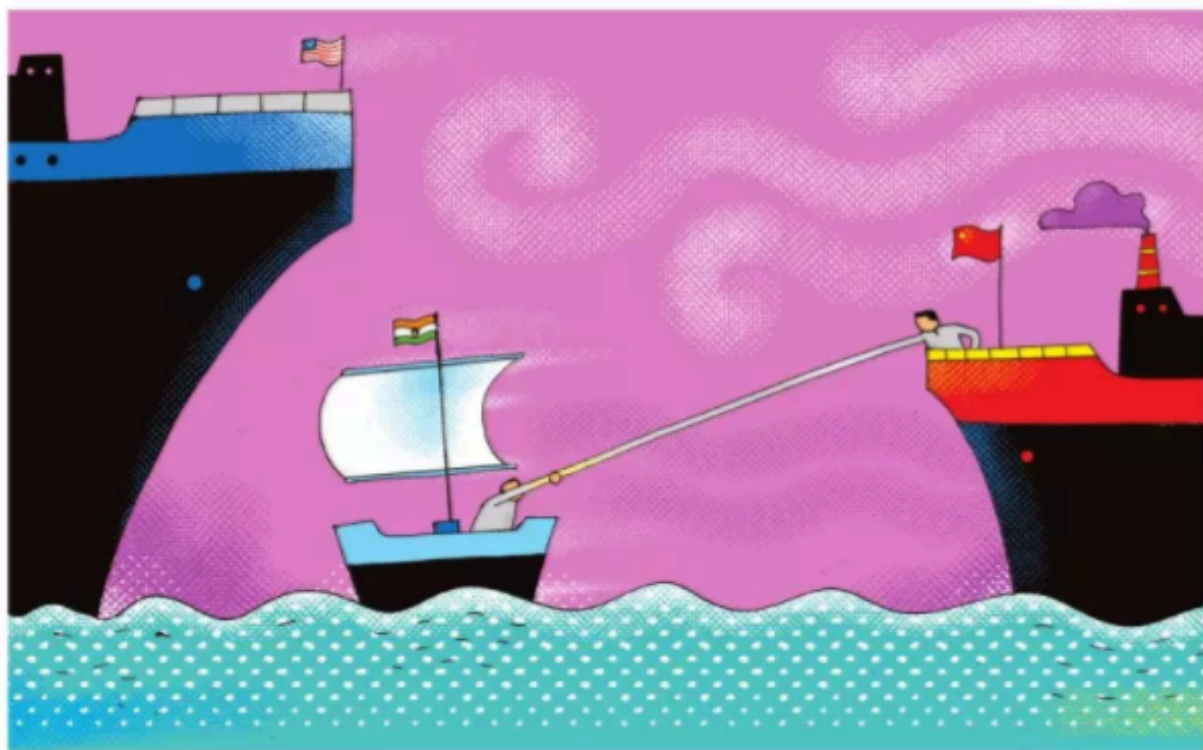


Illustration: CR Sasikumar

things: one, that India and China should look at their relations from a strategic perspective; and two, that a deeper and wider exchange between the two great civilisations is desirable. Why these two things?

The strategic perspective is quite simple: India, you have come closer to the US, but before you commit yourself too strongly, think carefully about your interests. America is far away, and we are your powerful neighbour. Think of how America under Trump is behaving with its allies, and they might forget you, too. We will always be here.

Is Japan important to the strategic perspective?

Japan and India, by themselves, would not worry China. If they get together with the US, that is much more worrying.

And the civilisational argument?

That is perhaps some former Chinese ambassadors to India advising the speech writers of Xi that Indians are very civilisation-conscious. They think Buddhism spread from India to China and the world, that Chinese monks came across the mountains to learn from India. Arguments about India's civilisational wealth generally go down well with the Indians. To talk about India's civilisation is good diplomacy.

Do the Chinese not think in civilisational terms?

Yes, but not the same way. India has spawned quite a few civilisations, several religions and a diversity of cultures. The

Chinese have never emphasised diversity as a civilisational virtue. Theirs is a very different concept of civilisation.

Other than the strategic and civilisational arguments, economic development is another topic that appears in the post-summit statements.

Xi would have had his tongue in his cheek. The Chinese do not think they need India for its development. India does look to China with economic admiration but China does not. Deeper economic relations with India could be viewed as a means to an end, a means to ensure that India does not drift off into a US-Japan-India strategic triangle.

So your argument appears to be that the primary purpose of China's foreign policy vis-à-vis India today is to preempt its possible strategic drift towards the US and Japan.

I would certainly say so. But let me add one more thing to the equation. Compared to India, China takes Japan more seriously. If there were a clash — not a war — in the East China and South China Seas and the combined might of the Japanese and Americans humiliated China, that would be a very serious blow to the Chinese. It would be especially damaging to Xi who thinks of the Chinese military as his ultimate basis of support.

Can we talk about the implications of the Wuhan summit for Pakistan? Especially intriguing is the suggestion in the post-summit statements that India and China should pursue "a joint

economic project" in Afghanistan?

That idea must have come from the Indians. India knows that if its Afghanistan projects are undertaken by the Indians alone, then the Taliban, supported by Pakistani military, will mount attacks. The Taliban would not attack joint China-India projects, for the Pakistanis would not allow that to happen. Pakistan is simply too indebted to China. Moreover, China has its own interests in Pakistan. China is building a port there, and there is a China-Pakistan economic corridor, too. These are projects that serve Chinese interests.

Reports in Chinese newspapers suggest that both Xi and Modi have agreed to direct their armies to implement confidence-building measures. Is it your understanding that while both countries view the border problem as relatively intractable in the short run, they would like to avoid skirmishes, and until such time that a resolution is found, they believe they can do business on other matters?

That, I think, would be the Indian desire. The Chinese perspective would be slightly different. They already have Aksai Chin and they have had it for a long time. I don't think they are massively keen on adding Arunachal Pradesh to their territory. That is not in their interest. What they would like is to keep the pot boiling, so they can use it whenever they don't like what India is doing. The Chinese would want India to have a nagging fear that the Chinese can raise the temperature in Arunachal Pradesh whenever they want to.