

India-China Relations: Getting Beyond the ‘Abnormal’

C Raja Mohan

Summary

The apparent convergence between Delhi and Beijing on the Russia-Ukraine crisis may not be sufficient to end the current freeze in the bilateral relations between the two Asian giants. If China Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s surprise visit to Delhi, however, results in the early restoration of peace and tranquillity on their contested border, bilateral ties could begin return to normalcy.

Introduction

There is no doubt that Russia’s war in Ukraine gave a special twist to the brief visit of China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Delhi on 24 and 25 March 2022. Wang Yi, who barely stayed 24 hours in the Indian capital, was on a whirlwind tour of the subcontinent. He began his journey in Islamabad, where he attended the ministerial summit of the Organisation of Islamic Conference as a special guest of the host nation, Pakistan. From Islamabad, he made a dash to Kabul, where he met the Taliban leadership, then landed in Delhi, and travelled from there to Kathmandu.

Wang Yi’s brief but significant visit to Delhi raised hopes for unfreezing the bilateral relations that have been in deep chill since April 2020 when the military standoff between the two countries in the high Himalayas unfolded. The differences between Delhi and Beijing on how to end the current stasis in bilateral relations were well known before the visit. China’s emphasis was on setting aside the problems on the border and focusing on the broader dimensions of the relationship. India, in contrast, insisted that the restoration of the status quo on the border before the military crisis that broke out in April 2020 was a precondition for the normalisation of the bilateral relationship. Wang Yi’s visit signalled a high-level Chinese political effort to end the impasse [amid the rapidly changing global equations](#) after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Wang Yi’s Outreach

This was the first visit to India by a Chinese leader since April 2020, when the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) crossed the Line of Actual Control to seize territory on the Indian side. Second, this visit was at the initiative of Beijing. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the end of February 2022, India and China have found themselves on the same side at the United Nations (UN). As strategic partners of Russia, India and China were reluctant to condemn Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine and abstained on most UN resolutions. This unexpected convergence on a major international crisis provided a basis for a fresh look at the bilateral relationship. Third, the question of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit later this year in Beijing added some urgency to the question of

reviving multilateral cooperation between the two countries amidst the weakening of Russia and the unprecedented unity within the West.

Different Priorities

In Delhi, Wang Yi met with Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar. On his part, Wang Yi emphasised the importance of putting the border dispute at its [“proper position”](#) and expanding the engagement to the broader bilateral relationship. India, in turn, reiterated its position on the primacy of the border issue. India was not insisting on resolving the ‘border dispute’ but a restoration of peace and tranquillity on the border ‘disturbed’ by Chinese aggression in eastern Ladakh in April 2020.

During his media conference after the talks, Jaishankar recalled his earlier meetings with Wang Yi in 2020 and 2021 and their shared understanding on the approach to settle the boundary crisis. Jaishankar “welcomed the progress” in the crisis resolution and noted that his talks with Wang Yi were about [“expediting the process”](#). Explaining his honest response to Wang Yi’s call for a normalisation of the relationship, Jaishankar said, “The frictions and tensions that arise from China’s deployments since April 2020 cannot be reconciled with a normal relationship between two neighbours.”

It is believed that Wang agreed to take onboard India’s concerns on the abnormal boundary situation. In his remarks to the media, Jaishankar said, “If we are both committed to improving our ties, then this commitment must find full expression in ongoing disengagement talks.” The focus after Wang Yi’s visit will be on the commander level meetings. Disengagement has already occurred at [four of the five friction points](#) that emerged in April 2020; it should not be impossible to sort out the remaining friction point if the PLA demonstrates flexibility. Quick progress on that front could set the stage for an Indian engagement with the broader agenda of the bilateral relationship.

India’s New Realism

On his part, Wang Yi underlined the importance of the new moment in world affairs triggered by the war in Ukraine, appreciated the common positions of Delhi and Beijing on the issue, and called for stronger China-India cooperation in the multilateral arena. He pointed to the unfolding [‘Asia moment’](#) in world affairs by pointing to the BRICS summit in China this year and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and G-20 summits which will be hosted by India in 2023. Doval and Jaishankar are hard-boiled realists and were unwilling to be carried away by this familiar past rhetoric in the discourse on India-China relations. During his media conference, Jaishankar framed the current convergent positions in a narrow manner. He stated, “On Ukraine, we discussed our respective approaches and perspectives but agreed that diplomacy and dialogue must be the priority.”

In the past, India might have been eager to sweep bilateral conflicts under the carpet to posture with China on global issues jointly. For today’s Delhi, neither “Asian solidarity” nor “standing up to the West” are overriding ideological compulsions. In fact, India has deepened its partnership with the United States (US) and its allies across the board. It is a member of the Quad in the Indo-Pacific, along with the US, Australia and Japan. In refusing

to take China's bait on Ukraine and keeping its focus on the border crisis, Delhi has put the ball back in Beijing's court. If China quickly resolves the two-year-old military crisis, India will begin to normalise the bilateral relations. Even more importantly, Delhi knows that reduced Chinese military pressure on the border will significantly enhance its room for manoeuvre in the shifting great power dynamic.

.....

Professor C Raja Mohan is a Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and a Senior Fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute in New Delhi, India. He can be contacted at crmohan@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.