In our era of strongman politics, leadership interactions can play a larger role in foreign relations than before. In the first half of 2018, the leaders of China and India met on several occasions, in a clear attempt to calm tensions in the aftermath of the Doklam (Donglang) standoff and ‘reset’ bilateral ties. Their interactions coincided with growing structural changes in the international system caused by the new surge of American unilateralism under US President Trump. These developments have revived long-standing questions: Can political leaders help to moderate the fluctuations in bilateral relations? Or, are such fluctuations largely the result of structural factors beyond the control of political actors?

There is an established Quantitative Measure Project on China’s Relations with Major Powers, at the Institute of International Relations in Tsinghua University. The project gathers and measures major events between China and seven other major powers since 1950. The scores of these bilateral relations are given and updated on a monthly basis. Figure 1 below gives the scores on China-India relations since 2017.
The figure shows that while China-India relations hit consecutive lows during the Doklam standoff, the lowest score during this period actually occurred in February 2018 – six months after both sides had disengaged from the area. On the 15th of that month, PM Modi had paid a visit to Arunachal Pradesh – a region over which China has claimed sovereignty. The visit, coupled with Beijing’s formal protest, resulted in strong nationalist sentiments in both countries and strained bilateral relations. Subsequently in March 2018, the scores improved slightly after both governments displayed a willingness to engage and show greater flexibility in their bilateral relations.

As the global environment becomes increasingly turbulent and uncertain, rising powers such as China and India are beginning to feel the structural pressure of these new developments. In March 2018, President Trump imposed extra steel and aluminum tariffs, reasserting American dominance through unilateral and protective tariffs. While China was clearly his main target, India has been targeted as well.

To some observers, the trade disputes between the US and India are part of Washington’s strategy to delink economic relations from strategic cooperation with New Delhi and to press India to open its market to American companies. This has effectively created a gap in expectations between both sides. For some time, PM Modi has made India-US relations a priority of his foreign policy agenda. This has paid off in the strategic sphere as India has been welcomed by the US “as a leading global power and stronger strategic and defence partner” and later as a “Major Defence Partner.” But the deepened strategic relations with the US could not save India from trade bullying.

Leaders can respond to structural pressure in different ways, such as accommodating the hegemon’s demands or fighting back to protect their interests. The leaders of China and India both chose the tougher road of fighting back. Under PM Modi’s leadership, India has insisted on pursuing economic reforms at its own pace and prioritized the interests of its domestic stakeholders in this process. Any attempts at forcing India to accommodate foreign requests has been seen as challenging its strategic autonomy and been met with resistance by Indian elites and strategists.
Being caught in similar predicament, China and India could join hands to push back against this structural pressure together. However, given bilateral tensions in the aftermath of Doklam, strong political will was needed to break the ice. In April 2018, President Xi and PM Modi met in Wuhan. While there was no joint press conference, nor a joint statement on their discussions, the informal summit proved to be a useful platform for both sides to communicate their differences, and it opened the possibility of more positive interactions. Indeed, as reflected in Figure 1, the bilateral relation scores have been on a gradual upward trend.

After Wuhan, President Xi and PM Modi met three more times on the sidelines of various international summits: in June 2018 during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Qingdao; in July 2018 during the BRICS summit in Johannesburg; and in December 2018 during the G20 summit in Buenos Aires. These meetings gave both sides opportunities to deepen strategic communication and cultivate leader-to-leader chemistry. This can be seen in how both have sought to downplay their mutual differences and manage each other’s concerns.

On at least two occasions, the Indian government responded to and rejected media speculation that the status at the face-off site in Doklam, after the pullback from the 2017 confrontation, had changed. During his keynote speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue 2018, PM Modi denied international speculation that India was using the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad) to contain China and asserted that the ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept was not a strategy nor “a club of limited members.” Such remarks showed India’s change in perception regarding competition in the region.

Unlike the US's delinking policy with India, both China and India have been keen to de-link border disputes from more general relations, so as to inject stability into bilateral and multilateral cooperation frameworks, such as working on new international institutions, preserving and promoting norms on multilateralism rather than unilateralism, and engaging in new “China-India plus” diplomatic initiatives to facilitate bilateral cooperation in a third country.

Another observation from Figure 1 is that there has been little to no change in scores since early 2019. This new trend can be interpreted in one of two ways. The first is that progress in bilateral ties are slowing and the relationship may be beginning to stagnate. A second, more optimistic view is that China-India relations are showing signs of stabilising, and moving forward in a ‘slow and steady’ manner. How this trend can be interpreted depends on how much effort both sides have invested in overcoming their differences and managing their potential impacts.

In May 2019, China announced that it had no further objection to listing Masood Azhar in the United Nations blacklist under the 1267 Committee. Beijing’s announcement was made during the general elections in India and despite the fact that it might be seen as helping the ruling coalition’s election campaign, thus indicating Chinese satisfaction with what PM Modi and his government had done in controlling bilateral differences.

After the Modi-led BJP won their landslide election victory earlier this year, one of its major policy initiatives was to abolish Article 370 that deals with the status of India-controlled Kashmir. In abolishing 370, it also established a new Union Territory in Ladakh – a part of this territory is claimed by China. The Chinese government expressed its firm opposition to such a unilateral move. Within days, however, the Indian External Affairs Minister explained Delhi’s position during an official visit to Beijing, stating that “[t]here was no implication for either the external boundaries of India or the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China. India was not raising any additional territorial claims.”

It can be regarded a positive sign that both sides were willing to communicate their differences over Article 370, and the subsequent 2nd meeting of the High Level Mechanism on Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges went on as scheduled. The interactions at this round reflected both leaders' determination to manage and prevent the Kashmir issue from escalating into a dispute. Chinese reaction on the matter was generally restrained, and the Indian decision to clearly explain its position was appreciated as a gesture of good-will.
The scoring trend in Figure 1 shows that the rapprochement curve since March 2018 is still in good shape. With the second informal summit in October on track, more positive developments can be expected. Hence, a prediction is that both sides will continue to manage their differences. China-India relations will pick up, slowly but steadily. A possible scenario ahead is that the structural pressure will remain an intervening factor but both leaders will continue to write their own history by making their own political choices on contentious and cooperative issues.

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