



### **Round Table Discussion on “Informal Wuhan Summit”**

**Speakers:** Prof. Alka Acharya, Amb. Vinod C. Khanna, Dr. Jabin T Jacob, Dr. Atul Bhardwaj, Prof. Manoranjan Mohanty

**Chair:** Prof. Sreemati Chakrabarti

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**Seminar Room, ICS**

The roundtable discussion held in ICS to discuss the ‘Informal meeting’ (*fei zhengshi hui tan*) between Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping brought in a multilayered level of analysis. With a panel of five members, constituting academicians, a career diplomat and a retired naval officer, the discussion led to diverse perspectives. The central theme of the discussion was to understand the motive behind the meeting, its implications as well as the general question of what India achieved out of this meeting.

Amb. Vinod Khanna started the discussion by quoting former Foreign Secretary of India, Mr. Jaishankar, that the talks to conduct this informal summit had begun at the sidelines of the SCO summit (6-7 June 2017) held in Astana, Kazakhstan. He asserted that although Doklam issue may have loomed over the informal meeting, it was not *the* reason behind the Wuhan decision. The reasons behind conducting this informal meeting were speculated to be mainly driven by domestic politics and economic concerns. Dr. Bhardwaj highlighted the point of domestic politics of both the countries being the driving factor for conducting the Wuhan meeting. Dr. Bharadwaj’s assertion was also supported by Prof. Acharya when she mentioned, how the upcoming parliamentary election in India and China-US trade war have driven the two leaders to divert the attention of the ‘masses’ through this meeting.

The other major aspects of the discussion were issues of trust deficit, terrorism, bilateral cooperation and lack of institutional mechanisms. Quoting Chinese official press release, Amb. Khanna reiterated that both sides agreed to cooperate and promote more active, innovative and sustainable

solution to global challenges such as climate change and terrorism. He looked at it as a positive part of the meeting. However, Dr. Jacob argued that the possibility of cooperation on terrorism between India and China is unlikely as the definition of terrorism for both the countries vary significantly. In terms of weak institutions, both Prof. Acharya and Dr. Jacob mentioned that there is a lack of institutional coherence between the hierarchical bureaucratic setup in policy-making. India has lately begun to follow the Chinese approach of ‘personality driven’ politics. Both the speakers reiterated that India should function based on institutions and processes, rather than playing the political game according to Chinese rulebook. The other recurring point highlighted by all the five speakers was the significant trust deficit between the two countries which needs to be amended for any positive development in the relationship.

On the question of the outcome of this meeting, the opinions of the panel varied. Prof. Acharya and Dr. Bhardwaj looked at this meeting as a positive step in India-China relationship. Dr. Bhardwaj claimed that India has moved away from the ‘gun-boat diplomacy’ to a more pristine form of diplomacy, giving the diplomats space to create plausible conditions for peace talks. Prof. Acharya in agreement with Dr. Bhardwaj, said that the Wuhan meeting provided a chance to both the countries to just sit together and talk. On the other hand, Dr. Jacob was pessimistic and argued that this meeting did not produce any outcome. It merely became an ‘understanding oriented’ meet rather than ‘outcome oriented’.

Contrary to the opinion of Amb. Khanna who does not consider Wuhan summit a ‘milestone’, Prof. Mohanty thinks that the meeting can be called a ‘potential milestone’. To him the importance of this meeting is at par with Vajpayee’s visit of 2003 which set up the special representative framework. He also analysed the difference in state’s orientation as civilizational actors (great player) versus power players. India, being one of the oldest civilisation should aspire to be a great player instead of tangling itself into power politics. According to him, India should use its legacy of freedom struggle, Panchsheel, Bandung and third world anti-colonial solidarity to build an alternative to that of the Chinese and the American framework.

During the Q&A session, many interesting questions were raised by the audience. One of the questions raised was whether India and China had a completely trustworthy relationship. Dr. Jacob answered that structurally it was not possible. However, it was important to underline that this was a political challenge that India faced from China. Trust deficit existed due to the way both countries perceived the world and their relationship between each other. Prof. Acharya in response to the query made on economic factor replied that economy was a strategic factor. Unless India built a sub-

stantial economic foundation, there would remain a power asymmetry that in turn would lead to a trust deficit, thus, making peaceful negotiations difficult. On the question of confrontational relationships, Dr. Jacob argued that the democratic setup of India was the biggest leverage over China. He emphasised that just like China cannot ignore India in the Belt and Road initiative because of geographic positioning, it also cannot ignore India in politics simply because India is the largest democracy. He then concluded the discussion with a note of caution for India, which depended too much on personality driven diplomacy. This would make India behave more like China, in which case, there will be no leverage at all against the Chinese or in international politics.

*Report prepared by Divya Tyagi, Research Intern, ICS.*

### **About the Speakers**

**Prof. Alka Acharya** is an Honorary Fellow and Former Director, ICS. She is a Professor of Chinese Studies, Centre of East Asian Studies, JNU.

**Amb. Vinod C. Khanna** is a Former Director and Emeritus Fellow, ICS. He is a former career diplomat.

**Dr. Jabin T. Jacob** is a Senior China Analyst. He was a former fellow of ICS.

**Dr. Atul Bhardwaj** is a former naval officer and an Adjunct Fellow, ICS.

**Prof. Manoranjan Mohanty** is an Honorary Fellow and Former Chairperson, ICS. He is a former Professor of Political Science, Delhi University

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