

Informal Meetings in Foreign Policy

Anu

Master of Arts, International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University
anudhull3@gmail.com

Dynamism has been the characteristic feature of India-China relations, yet foreign policy achievements of both countries are very few. Keeping the dynamism in practice, both countries have had two successive summits where both are acclaiming these meetings as successful and unique. This may be an unprecedented step between the two Asian giants, but there are several precedents of such meetings where Heads of States have met informally.

With this understanding, this article questions the efficacy of Wuhan and Chennai Summits by analyzing it against the background of two such informal interactions – the Kissinger-Zhou meeting in 1971 and series of North Korea-South Korea informal meetings in 2018-19. Naturally, the circumstances, actors, intentions and mood were all unique and cannot be compared, but nonetheless, they provide a framework to analyze these meetings for what they really are: ‘soft’ instruments of foreign policy. This paper also dwells on the circular dilemma of formal and informal choices considering institutionalizing these informal summits.

Introduction

The “Wuhan Spirit”, in the backdrop of the 1st informal summit between Xi Jinping and

Narendra Modi in Wuhan in May 2018, was claimed as a major breakthrough in India-China relations. It was seen as a harbinger of developing mutual trust between the two. This ‘spirit’ was carried forward at “Chennai Connect” – the second informal summit between the two leaders, which was in fact held at Mamallapuram, over 50 kilometers away from Chennai – to invigorate people-to-people and civilizational connect. The present year 2020, marking 70th anniversary of India-China relations, would jointly be celebrated by holding 70 events highlighting this “connect”.

Contextually, the period between the two summits has witnessed several cold expressions from both sides. For example, China’s stand of bringing abrogation of Article 370 at multilateral platforms, its reluctance to listing Masood Azhar in United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Terrorists’ list, its official reactions questioning Indian leaders’ visits to Arunachal Pradesh claiming it as threat to its territorial sovereignty etc. Denouncing these attempts by China as an intrusion in its internal matters and alleging China of siding with terror-funding Pakistan, India has also shown discontent towards China.

The second round of informal talks was heralded by both leaders as a significant success as it signaled the regularization/institutionalization of the

practice of Informal Summits. President Xi invited PM Modi for a 3rd informal summit and the latter accepted it immediately (MEA- GOI, 2019). All these developments necessitate the analysis of these informal meetings as they play out in Sino-Indian bilateral relations.

An objective assessment of these informal meetings requires looking at some parameters against which their diplomatic efficacy and foreign policy objectives can be analyzed. Considering the gap in existing foreign policy literature on the definition, role and nature of these informal meetings; there is a need to understand their mechanisms and how they impact, and/or influence the conduct of foreign policy. The main feature of these being informal is with regard to the conduct: absence of any formal set of frameworks, which in turn is expected to enhance the spontaneity of actors to maneuver through the discussions. This then widens the scope of interaction without any institutional blueprints.

This article attempts to analyze the role of informal meetings in carrying forward foreign policy objectives. It also seeks to understand the motivating or enabling factors in choosing the mode of informal interactions by India and China, despite having formal relations. In this regard, cues are taken from two related informal interactions to defuse tensions, as a precedent – the Henry Kissinger-Zhou Enlai meeting in 1971, and meetings between leaders of the North and South Korea in 2018-19.

Kissinger-Zhou Meeting in 1971

The “Kissinger-Zhou” secret meeting in 1971 provides a good example of opening avenues and creating channels of communication, which was later hailed by the then US President, Richard Nixon as a “diplomatic success” (USC-U.S. China Institute 2011). This meeting was facilitated by the then President of Pakistan, Yahya Khan (Phillips and Keefer 2006).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the tensions of the Cold War and the staunch ideological differences between the U.S. and China illustrated the lack of any convergence between the two, with China not being

recognized diplomatically by the US. However, after the Sino-Soviet split in late 1950s geopolitics and security concerns started changing, especially in Asia. Owing to these changes Asia witnessed the emergence of post-colonial nation-states, marking its policies through the Balance of Power. Keeping this in context, both the US and China opted for a prudential approach, focusing on their respective national interests. Both tried to expand their foreign policy horizons by creating a common platform for interactions, thereby leading to the Kissinger-Zhou meeting in 1971¹. While the U.S. sought an opportunity for a deeper engagement in Asia through China, the latter viewed this as an escape from isolationism it had been experiencing after the Sino-Soviet split.

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The U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai on 17th July 1971 met in Beijing without any prior announcement or formal arrangements. In fact, this meeting set the ground for formalization of relations between the two (McDuffee, 2017). Despite long driven mutual distrust and antagonism, both leaders amended their demands as per conditions put forth by the other. They effectively conveyed the messages of their respective Countries - to have a formal meeting between both the Heads of States in the immediate future. This formal meeting was actualized in the visit of President Nixon to China in 1972, which initiated the process of rapprochement between the two. The 1971 meeting was successful owing to the manner it was conducted, the prudence and capacity of Kissinger and Zhou, the balanced approach with clear objectives and flexibility in ways.

While the Kissinger-Zhou interaction provides some reference points for analyzing informal meetings/interactions, achievement of foreign policy objectives cannot be hinged merely on the nature of any bilateral initiative. The outcome, *inter alia*, depends on the willingness of the leaders involved, and this segues into the next case study - a series of informal interactions between North and South Korea-two countries which are technically at war for 60 odd years.

Inter-Korean Informal Meetings During 2018-19

Despite having the same culture, race and history, the Korean Peninsula still stands divided by 38th Parallel Line into Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK) or North Korea, and Republic of Korea (ROK) or South Korea. Both countries have long been trying for the normalization and reconciliation of relations but without any significant achievements. Constrained by power politics in the larger geopolitical realm, DPRK and ROK have been reticent to engage in any bilateral dialogue on their own. Be it the 1991 Basic Agreement on Reconciliation, “Sunshine Policy” of Republic of Korea in 1998, first Presidential summit of two leaders in 2000 in Pyongyang or “Policy for Peace and Prosperity” in 2003, the countries are unable to have a lasting solution. The biggest setback to these efforts was in 2009 with DPRK announcing the annulment of all past agreements between the two countries.

These case studies reflect the perceptions and operational mechanics of informal summits: the leniency in demands, flexibility in ways to achieve the intended objectives, utilizing the medium to convey the intentions freely and the follow up on the initiatives taken.

In the latter half of 2016, perpetual hostilities between the US and DPRK escalated resulting in Kim-Jong Un and Donald Trump threatening each other with nuclear warfare. Amidst continuous nuclear tests by DPRK and increasing military presence of U.S. in South Korea, the security concerns in the Peninsula

by 2018, were all time high. In such circumstances, both the Korean countries extended their willingness to negotiate with each other (*The Conversation* 2018). While ROK was aiming for a settlement between US and DPRK in order to have peace in the region, DPRK had sought mediatory role of ROK as significant in defusing its tensions with the U.S. Both leaders through this manner, stressed on the need for efforts without any third power mediation; in effect, shaping “their own destiny themselves” (Panmunjom Declaration 2018). During the first US-DPRK summit in June 2018, both leaders stressed on the forthcoming meetings to be “informal” in order to build confidence. For DPRK, this legitimate diplomatic move was significant due to Kim’s meeting in the Singapore summit with President Trump, scheduled for July 2018. For ROK, denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was the foremost objective. Through these informal summits, it had achieved the first step of bringing DPRK on same table to discuss such a serious issue.

Despite having three inter-Korean meetings, this initiative could not produce tangible results belying all reconciliatory hopes, thus bringing the relations back to stalemate. Since the collapse of the Hanoi summit in February 2019, initial efforts of Moon Jae-in to bring U.S. and DPRK together on sanctions relief and nuclear disarmament issues, proved fruitless given the rigidity of Trump and Kim-Jong Un. DPRK immediately resorted to conducting missile tests; US increased its military and defense exercises in ROK thus making DPRK wary of the restoration of U.S.-ROK ties. Having achieved the unprecedented initial accomplishments of creating common platforms, this initiative, the first of its kind between any two neighbouring countries in Asia stands grounded, thus highlighting the lack of movement off the ground. The temporary momentum in bilateral relations and cultural exchanges were much less than what these meetings intended to achieve. These informal meetings could have been successful, had the US factor not been dominating in the inter-Korean relations and had the US and DPRK leaders been lenient in their demands. These developments highlight the gap between

intent and outcomes due to constraints imposed by ground realities.

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Informal Summits in Sino-Indian relations: From Wuhan to Mamallapuram

Owing to the inter-dependence in the economic sphere and having stakes in shared regional geo-politics, both India and China prefer to maintain normalcy and peace between them. But the underlying concern of both countries is the unresolved border dispute. Further, geopolitical competition which has kept both the countries seeking dominance – especially in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative – has now entered into the maritime domain as well. Pakistan and the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – which India views as a threat to its sovereignty as it passed through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir – has complicated the relationship, and served as a destabilizing factor in India-China relations. The stand-off at the Doklam plateau in 2017, which lasted for more than 70 days, illustrated the trust deficit and fragility in India-China bilateral relations. As a result, even though things return to status-quo, formal mechanisms of dialogue came under immense pressure.

With this, first informal summit in Wuhan in April 2018 came into play. It was seen as an opportunity for both Heads of States to meet directly and candidly to defuse tensions and to build confidence, adding a more personal touch to the interactions. The spirit of recognizing differences, developing mutual trust between both countries and fighting terrorism in all forms and manifestations were shared for proper management of bilateral relations. Both leaders reiterated initiatives such as ‘Closer Development Partnership’, pluralist and participatory global economic order by pushing forward bilateral trade and the need to strengthen strategic communication on matters of common interest.

However, this spirit started fading soon after regional and national developments had started to unfold and thus exposed the gaps in the rhetoric and implementation of this ‘spirit’. Widening of trade deficit, continuous security concerns over the Arunachal border and deterioration of India- Pakistan relations etc., exposed the hollowness of the spirit of respecting differences and non-interference.

Despite of these contentions, both Asian giants went ahead for another informal meeting in Mamallapuram in October 2019 with the theme of “*Manufacturing Partnership*”. Focused on the theme of having a development oriented partnership, both sides agreed to have a ‘*High-Level Trade and Economic Dialogue Mechanism*’. The pictures of both leaders sharing candid expressions in the historic town of Mamallapuram can be taken as conduits to utilization of soft power by both. However this free environment could not bring out discussions on contentious issues of Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan factor, China creating tensions in maritime security and border disputes.

Analysis of these two informal summits between India and China raises many questions ranging from scheduling and conduct of the meetings to the implementation and assessment process. That the summits were in fact planned, scheduled and conducted in a pre-defined framework belies the tag of informal. Further, having no assessment process or implementation framework for these meetings reduces their significance in foreign policy, though a joint assessment regarding the implementation process was agreed upon in Wuhan. Moreover, the space for maneuvering was not utilized efficiently, as both sides did not have specific and real objectives to be achieved through these meetings. Hence, the summits have not gone beyond the immediate feel-good factor and optics, with long standing issues far from getting resolved. Further, it does not seem that the mutual distrust too has been reduced. While China has been openly refusing the entry of India in United Nations Security Council and Nuclear Supply Group, India also openly criticizes BRI denying any dialogue on joining due to the CPEC.

That informal ways were taken by both countries despite having formal mechanisms and the announcement for a third summit, these informal summits are getting turned into a regular practice, along with the availability of all institutional arrangements to back them. This, in the first place raises questions on the initiative of having informal meetings. Second, if informal ways had been considered to diffuse tensions, why were unresolved disputes or contemporary issues not brought to the table?

These meetings were also followed by Post-Summit Declarations by the respective Foreign Ministries, in the same way formal declarations are released. Though declarations of both the countries after second meeting differ on crucial issues like that of the Kashmir issue, Pakistan's role and regional infrastructural co-operation etc. (Singh 2019) This divergence on the issues pertaining to security, economic and sovereignty related spheres clearly demonstrates the lack of any connect between the two. Adding to these, without any assessment on how these meetings are performing, institutions in both countries are employed to facilitate their regularisation. This regularisation exemplifies the possibility of rendering this initiative into another nominal formal practice only to be held for the sake of conducting. But this regularization cannot be considered an unprecedented or an innovative tool to achieve foreign policy objectives. As argued, this initiative is not performing as promised in carrying forward foreign policy objectives, especially that of India.

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INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

8/17, Sri Ram Road, Civil Lines,
Delhi 110054, INDIA

T: +91 (0) 11 2393 8202

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