

By Invitation

# A silver bullet for our hard times

Personal relations matter, and face-to-face meetings between leaders are more important than ever when bilateral ties are bad



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We live in dark times.

There are at least three major dark clouds hovering above our world. The first is inflation. It is roaring rapidly across the world, toppling weak governments (like in Sri Lanka and Italy) along the way. The second is the Ukraine war. No end is in sight. And the spike in energy and food prices it has generated has aggravated global inflation. As Tom Friedman said recently, poor Europeans will soon have to choose between heating and eating. The third is the zero-Covid policy of China. It has slowed China's economic growth significantly, depriving the world of one of its major growth engines.

With so much doom and gloom hovering over us, is there a silver bullet that can save humanity?

Yes, there is. In response to global crises, we need global cooperation, especially among the major powers, like the United States and China. And to get global cooperation, we need global leaders to meet, preferably face to face. Fortunately, there will be opportunities for them to meet soon – for example, at the Group of 20 (G-20) Leaders' Meeting in Bali from Nov 15-16 and at the Apec Economic Leaders' Meeting in Bangkok from Nov 18-19.

It's truly tragic that presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping have not been able to meet face to face since Mr Biden's election in November 2020, two years ago.

Covid-19 prevented such meetings. Instead, they have spoken through telephone or video calls five times. Virtual meetings cannot generate the same warmth and sense of camaraderie that face-to-face meetings generate. And I have no doubt that there will be warm smiles when Mr Biden and Mr Xi finally meet in person in November, probably in Bali.

Indeed, Mr Biden is the first American president to be elected with a pre-existing personal relationship with his Chinese counterpart (although George H. W. Bush also knew Chinese leaders well). When then Vice-President Biden visited China in August 2011, he spent about 10 hours with Mr Xi, also Vice-President at the time. And when Mr Xi visited the US in February, 2012, he spent many hours with Mr Biden as well. Their warmth towards each other is visible in a video showing their joint visit to a school in China, which has received over 87,000 views on YouTube.

Relations between the US and China have clearly worsened since Mr Xi and Mr Biden last met in person. However, I've learnt from 33 years in diplomacy that personal relations can continue even if bilateral ties have

deteriorated. Hence, a face-to-face meeting between Mr Xi and Mr Biden in Bali will certainly provide opportunities to remove serious misunderstandings that have developed in recent years. And the most dangerous misunderstanding is over Taiwan, the issue that is the most likely to trigger a war between the US and China.

President Biden has clearly baffled the Chinese (and, indeed, most of the world) with his four statements on Taiwan, declaring firmly each time that the US would defend Taiwan. The world is baffled because each time he said this, the State Department "clarified" that his statement had not changed the US commitment to a "one China" policy and that the US did not encourage Taiwanese independence.

Curiously, Mr Biden, as a senator, wrote an op-ed in the *Washington Post* in 2001 criticising then President George W. Bush for saying that the US had an obligation to defend Taiwan, suggesting that Mr Bush had thereby changed the US policy of strategic ambiguity to a policy of ambiguous strategic ambiguity.

Similarly, Mr Xi and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi should also try to arrange a face-to-face meeting in Bali. It was a great pity that both didn't meet face-to-face at the Sept 15-16 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Uzbekistan. Mr Modi and Mr Xi found themselves right next to each other in one of the photo ops, but didn't shake hands, speak or even look at each other. No official explanation has been provided for this non-meeting. However, the Asian emphasis on not "losing face" may have been responsible. Given the tense relationship

between China and India, neither side may have wanted to take the initiative to request the meeting.

#### A NEW NORM

This is why we should develop a new norm in international relations: leaders of major countries should automatically and unhesitatingly meet each other face-to-face when they are in the same city. Such face-to-face meetings are not that critical when relations are good. But they are critical, if not essential, when relations are bad.

As the late Israeli leader Shimon Peres once said: "You don't make peace with friends. You make it with very unsavoury enemies." Hence, the more unfriendly the relationship, the more important it is for the leaders to meet. If we develop the norm that leaders of countries with unfriendly relations should always meet, then there's no longer a question of "losing face".

There's no doubt that relations between China and India have worsened since the deadly clash between Chinese and Indian soldiers in Galwan Valley in June 2020. All the accounts I have heard suggest that this clash was an accident. Neither side wanted it. Indeed, until this incident, both sides had been very disciplined about avoiding coming to blows, even when they had close encounters. Although there has been disengagement between Chinese and Indian forces in some areas, overall relations remain tense at the border.

The real tragedy about this tense border relationship between China and India is that a solution to this difficult problem is within sight.

In theory, China claims 90,000

sq km of Indian-held territory in Arunachal Pradesh and India claims 38,000 sq km of Chinese-held territory in Aksai Chin. In practice, both sides know there will be no major exchange of territories in a final settlement. This is why two wise Chinese leaders – Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping – proposed a settlement on the basis of the existing Line of Actual Control (LAC) with no major exchange of territory. Senior and sensible policymakers

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from both sides know very well that this is how the final outcome will be determined. But neither side can admit this publicly.

#### MUSYAWARAH AND MUFAKAT

This is why it's important for Mr Modi and Mr Xi to meet in Bali. Indeed, before the Galwan clash, the two leaders had spent more time with each other than any other two leaders of rival major powers. They spent two days together in Mahabalipuram, India, in October 2019 and two days together in Wuhan, China, in April 2018. The bonhomie they showed towards each other in these meetings will not be easily recreated. Nonetheless, they should still meet.

It's good that the two forthcoming critical Apec and G-20 meetings will take place in South-east Asia. The Asean countries have led the world in finding pragmatic solutions to their bilateral problem by applying the Indonesian concept of "musyawarah and mufakat" (consultation and consensus).

They should now inject this "musyawarah and mufakat" DNA into the forthcoming G-20 and Apec meetings and insist that the Biden-Xi and Modi-Xi meetings take place when they are on Asean soil. If they do, our times will appear less dark. Perhaps a ray of sunshine might even appear.

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