Reviving India’s China Outreach

What is the issue?

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- There is now a mutual recognition in both India and China that a posture of hostility has undermined everybody’s interests.
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- While sprouts of recalibrating the relationship has started to show up, the process needs to be sustained to attain sufficient benefits.
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How has Indo-China relations progressed lately?

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- The India-China relationship has always been too complex and has varied from “Competition to cooperation to discord” at different points in time.
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- 2017 witnessed all facets of this relationship through varied events:
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- India’s trenchant critique of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),
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- India’s entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,
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- The Doklam Crisis (The most significant of all)
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- BRICS - acceleration of multilateral cooperation
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- Both positive and negative economic engagements
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- But despite these variations across engagements, the Doklam standoff

highlighted a clear case of simmering animosity.
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Why did Doklam escalate to such proportions?

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- While trigger for Doklam was for control over a narrow stretch of barren land, the conflict nucleus was formed much earlier in other arenas.
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- The main reason for the conflagration is the recent development of a deep rooted negative perception on both sides for the other's foreign policy moves.
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- This collapse in geopolitical trust was a striking factor that was widely visible across domains – and China's expansionist ambitions only aggravated this.
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- China's rising economic and political profile along with its massive initiatives like the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) had got India concerned.
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- Chinese foray into India's South Asian neighbourhood through infrastructure and strategic projects has been seen by India as an affront on its sovereignty.
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- On the other hand, India's pursuit of deeper military engagement with "U.S. and Japan" (Beijing's main strategic rivals) wasn't to the liking of China.
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- These conflicting pursuits nudged both countries to adopt an assertive foreign policy against the other to keep things under check.
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- Consequently, India tilted closer to the U.S., while China moved towards Pakistan, and on a scale that wasn't witnessed even during the Cold War.
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What was the result of such a hardball approach?

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- Throughout the hard-line phase, neither side was able to extract any significant concessions from the other.
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- NSG membership (Nuclear Suppliers Group) proved elusive for India majorly because of Chinese resistance.

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- Contrarily, China’s wasn’t successful in its bid to get India to tone down its resistant rhetoric against its BRI.
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- While China shielded Pakistan aided terror networks in international forums, India openly allied with anti-China forces as a counter.
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- In this backdrop, the heightened escalation at Doklam proved to be a wake up for both sides to realise the futility of such masochistic approach.
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- Hence, a policy reset seems to have commenced currently, and optimism is brewing on both sides for enhanced cooperation.
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How does the future look?

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- The conciliatory approach to China in the current setting has aroused scepticism from some, as they fear that vital issues might get compromised.
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- But the government seems to be thinking that with a conciliatory approach with China, India can’t tide over the multiple challenges in the neighbourhood.
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- Further Indo-China friction will only enhance Pakistan’s leverage over Beijing and reduce India’s bargaining power vis-a-vis Japan and USA.
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- Notably, despite their adverse relationship with China, both Japan and USA have truly valued their interdependence with Beijing, particularly in trade.
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- Further, India also sees value in enhancing economic cooperation with China, which could better shape the overall geo-political outcomes in the region.
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Source: The Hindu

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