

The India-China relationship: why links between Indian states and Chinese provinces are essential



*China and India need to strengthen the 'regional forum' mechanism to broaden the areas in which exchanges take place, rather than individual provinces, writes **Tridivesh Singh Maini**. Such engagement will broaden the constituency for a better relationship between both countries and foster better people-to-people linkages as well as economic ones, he concludes.*

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's [recent China visit](#) (his fourth in four years) for an informal summit was significant. What was especially of interest was the fact that Modi was received by Xi Jinping not in the capital city of China – Beijing – but in Wuhan (the capital of Hubei province). It is pertinent to point out here, that in his 2014 India visit, President Xi Jinping was received by PM Modi in Ahmedabad (Gujarat).

During his China visit of 2015, PM Modi's first stop was [Xian](#), which happens to be the hometown of President Xi Jinping. Modi has also received foreign dignitaries, other than Shinzo Abe, outside the national capital (New Delhi) and done away with protocol. Before examining the importance of links between Indian States and Chinese Provinces, it would be useful to give an overview of the links between Hubei and India.

Hubei

If one were to look at Hubei, it is an important destination for a number of reasons. In recent years, it has emerged as a key economic powerhouse of Central China. In terms of GDP, it ranks 2nd in Central China, and 8th in China as a whole. Wuhan, apart from emerging as an economic hub of Central China, is also home to a number of prestigious educational institutions, and an important [educational and innovational center](#).

The province also has a strong India connection (historical and contemporary). Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore had visited Wuhan during his China visits, and Xu Beihong, a famous Chinese painter from the region), was the first Chinese visiting professor to teach at Visva Bharati (now called Visva Bharati University), Santiniketan, an educational institution founded by Tagore. Acknowledging this relationship, [Prime Minister Modi also gifted prints of Xu's works to President Xi](#).

In recent years too, the province has played a substantial role in fostering ties with India, as it is home to a large number of international students, including Indian nationals. In 2017, HPDE sent a delegation to South Asian countries (India, Nepal, Sri Lanka) to attract more students, and [generous scholarships were instated to attract more South Asian students](#).

The province has also been promoting its tourist spots in India. During an India visit in [December 2013](#), the Hubei Provincial bureau sought to enhance awareness about some of the important sites in the province; including the Yangtze River Three Gorges, Shennongjia scenic spot and Wudang Mountains

Regional Leaders Forum

The importance of linkages between Indian states and Chinese Provinces is not just underscored by meetings between leaders of both countries, outside the national capitals, but also by the fact that during Modi's 2015 visit, [a State/Provincial Regional Leaders Forum was inaugurated](#), and this has facilitated exchanges between Indian Provinces and Chinese states. Both countries also have 14 sister city agreements.

Moreover, Indian states like Andhra Pradesh have become more proactive in recent years (Chief Ministers from a number of states like Bihar, Karnataka had visited China even before the dialogue was inaugurated). More recently, [Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister, Chandrababu Naidu visited China](#) first on the eve of PM Modi's 2015 visit (during the course of which he reached out to Chinese investors and met with high ranking officials), and then again in 2016 in order to attract investors. India has also been reaching out to [Non-Coastal provinces](#), for FDI, which have not been tapped so far.

Of late, [China has shown interest in Eastern India](#), and has been reaching out to West Bengal in particular, which is being given greater importance due to its location, as well as the [Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar \(BCIM\) Corridor project](#). The Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, has also recently [rescheduled her postponed trip to China](#) to woo investors. During the January 2018, Global Bengal Investors Summit, a number of investors from China were present however.



Indian, Chinese and US flags flutter in the breeze outside of a tech company. Photo credit: Danny Howard, [Flickr](#). [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).

Lessons from US-China

One of the biggest advantages of these linkages is that they strengthen the constituency for a better relationship whilst not attracting too much in the way of negative attention. US-China ties are a perfect illustration of the same. Links between Chinese Provinces and US states have played a pivotal role in improving ties for decades. [A structured Governor's Dialogue was however begun only in 2011](#), and since then, links between US states and Chinese provinces have strengthened further.

Close links between US States and Chinese Provinces

There are some interesting examples of how links between US provinces, other than California and New York have strengthened ties with China. In the past three years, through sub-national interactions, [Alaska has managed to draw 2 Billion USD of investment from China](#). Chinese links with the Midwestern region of US have also grown. For instance in 2016, [Missouri's](#) exports of goods to China reached 1.8 billion U.S. dollars, an increase of 76 percent over a period of 10 years, while its exports to the rest of the world grew only 9 percent, for the same period according to figures provided by US-China business council.

Interestingly in 1979, St. Louis (the capital of Missouri) was the first city to have a sister city in China. After the imposition of tariffs too, a number of [US states](#) (Nebraska, North Dakota and Minnesota, for instance) which have close economic links with China [urged Trump to re-think](#) saying they would be hit hard.

US States and China: post-Paris Agreement

Significantly, after [US President Donald Trump walked out of the Paris agreement](#), and following the recent imposition of tariffs, a number of US states have continued to reach out to China for investments. It may be pertinent to point out that California governor, Jerry Brown, during his visit to China in June 2017 even [met with Chinese President, Xi Jinping](#). Whilst they did not discuss the Paris Agreement, the fact that President Xi took time to meet the governor of California highlights the gravitas of such relationships to China.

Conclusion: moving beyond economics

It is important to ensure that ties at the sub-national level, are not restricted merely to the economic sphere, but include people-to-people linkages, which would pave the way for links in other areas. While a number of city-province linkages have been institutionalised, attempts should be made to use these for greater people-to-people contact so as to increase the number of Indian tourists visiting China and vice-versa. Furthermore, more direct flights between both countries (currently there are 42), and attempts should be made to attract more tourists and increase student linkages.

Attempts should also be made to link provinces-states with historical connections. For instance, links can be established between Wuhan, and West Bengal (Tagore's state). Earlier on the basis of [Buddhism](#), attempts were being made to establish Chinese Provinces like Shandong with Indian Provinces and such historical linkages should be revived.

Finally, It is also important to strengthen the 'regional forum' mechanism to broaden the areas in which exchanges take place, and send joint delegations (of more than one province/state) from both sides, rather than individual provinces. Such engagement will only broaden the constituency for a better relationship between both countries and foster better people-to-people linkages as well as economic ones.

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