GEOPOLITICS

THE SHENZHEN DECLARATION: WHAT TRUMP, XI AND PUTIN AGREED, AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR INDIA

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The Trump, Xi and Putin meeting in Shenzhen has happened, and the outcome for India is easier to judge than the build-up suggested. On Thursday, 19 November, US President Donald Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin met for about an hour and a half at the Kylin Villa in Shenzhen, on the sidelines of the APEC summit, CNBC reported. It was their first meeting as a trio. Afterwards they issued identical texts under the title "Heads of State Declaration toward Peace."

The declaration has four points. As permanent members of the Security Council, the three committed to reform the United Nations so that it can respond more effectively to global challenges. They said they plan "to increase the production and supply of refined petroleum products" and "reaffirmed the importance of stable energy flows." They said the International Criminal Court and similar bodies "must not abuse their jurisdiction." And they reaffirmed that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought", with a promise of dialogue on reducing nuclear risks and preventing proliferation. The full text was carried by Xinhua and People's Daily.

New Delhi's answer came on Friday. "We have taken note of this meeting between three APEC member countries," MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said, as quoted by Outlook. "We await a fuller accounting of the concrete outcomes of the meeting before offering our assessment." Chennaionline reported the same position.

What is new since last week

When I wrote about the possible Shenzhen meeting on 12 November, Washington and Beijing were describing it differently and nobody knew whether it would happen. Now we have a text, and it is thin. CNBC called the statements "brief and broad." The declaration gives no production figures for oil. It does not mention the war in Ukraine or the US war with Iran, though Trump said both were discussed. Outlook noted that the nuclear language does not commit any of the three to reducing their arsenals.

Reuters, in a report carried by Business Day, wrote that the three leaders have deep differences over Ukraine, Iran, nuclear weapons and trade, which casts doubt on how long the outcome will hold. The gaps showed even in Shenzhen: Xi told Trump the US must "do the right thing" on Taiwan.

So I read Shenzhen as a statement of intent by three powers who want to be seen talking. It is not yet a new order with rules that bind anyone.

What it means for Bharat

Take UN reform first. The three leaders spoke as permanent members of the Security Council, and the text does not mention the Security Council's own membership. India's position is on record. In late October, our Permanent Representative, Ambassador Parvathaneni Harish, told the General Assembly that "1945 cannot be held as the sole reference point for today's United Nations," and that "a reform that expands only the non-permanent category leaves the central imbalance untouched." He also pointed out that Asia-Pacific has more than 60 per cent of the world's population and only one permanent member, which is China. I will believe the three are serious about reform when they back expansion in the permanent category, with India in it. A reform written only by the five who already hold the veto would leave that imbalance in place.

The oil point is closer to home. Trump said he and Xi both felt strongly that oil must keep flowing through the Strait of Hormuz, which the Iran war has disrupted, Reuters reported. Steady supply and stable prices help India. More refined fuel on the world market could also mean more competition for Indian refiners, whose export strength I wrote about after Marco Rubio's visit to Jamnagar. The declaration gives no numbers, so for now it changes nothing on the ground.

The nuclear point is welcome in principle. Any dialogue that lowers the risk of nuclear war is good for India and its region. But I expect the three powers to talk mainly about their own arsenals, and India's concerns will not be on that agenda unless India puts them there.

The ICC point matters most to Putin, who faces an ICC arrest warrant over alleged war crimes in Ukraine, Outlook noted. I see little in it for India.

Why the MEA's caution is right

Some opposition leaders have asked why India was not in the room, Chennaionline reported. The plain answer is that the meeting was held on the sidelines of APEC, and India is not an APEC member. What matters more is that India already has its own lines to all three capitals.

Dhruva Jaishankar of the Observer Research Foundation America made that point to ANI on 19 November, as reported by The Tribune: "India does its various meetings, including with all three of those leaders." He noted that "Prime Minister Modi has met with those two leaders in the past two

years," and that Modi "just had the Quad meeting with the United States with President Trump." That Quad summit took place in Manila on 17 November, two days before Shenzhen. (I wrote about Manila here.)

I think the MEA has the tone right. "Taken note" and "await a fuller accounting" tell all three capitals that India will judge them by what they do after the photographs at the villa. That leaves India free to deal with each of the three on its own terms.

What to watch

Watch whether the promise on refined petroleum turns into numbers, and whether that moves fuel prices India pays. Watch whether the nuclear dialogue gets a date and a venue, and whether it stays limited to three countries. And watch the UN's reform talks in New York for any sign that the three will move Security Council reform from a sentence in a declaration to the negotiating text India has asked for.

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