

India Versus China: Why They Are Not Friends (Book Review)

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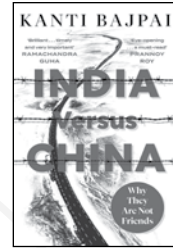
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Book Review

*India Versus China:
Why They Are Not Friends*
Kanti Bajpai

Juggernaut Books, New Delhi (2021)
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Amrita Jash

Seventy years to India-China diplomatic ties, the relations have taken a departure from the long-held ‘peaceful co-existence’ embedded in the *Panchsheel* Principles to that of becoming one of ‘confrontational co-existence’ under the new realities of the Eastern Ladakh stand-off. With ‘*Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai*’ only a metaphor of the past, India-China ties continue to struggle under the vestiges of the past, wherein, the ‘trust factor’ (or rather ‘trust deficit’) has to constantly run the test of time. After seventy years, the outcome is – competing interests complemented by mutual suspicion of each other’s intentions. Hence, the query: Can India and China ever become Friends?

Taking the Eastern Ladakh crisis as the backdrop, Kanti Bajpai, a renowned scholar of international affairs with a special interest in India-China relations, in his book *India Versus China: Why They Are Not Friends* contextualises the antagonism in the India-China ties by drawing from

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the past and assessing the implications of it in the present and future. As Bajpai emphatically posits: “Why did these two societies become locked into a conflict that has stubbornly refused to go away?” (p. 1). To which, Bajpai suggests the need for a deeper introspection as proved by the Ladakh crisis, the relations between the two countries “are darker and more complex than most observers appreciate or acknowledge” (ibid.). To be specific, as Bajpai asks in the very title- Why India and China are not Friends?

Taking a straightforward approach, Kanti Bajpai cogently puts forward four key reasons that justify why India and China are not friends, which in Bajpai’s view is a composite of ‘four Ps’: negative perceptions, differences over perimeters, rival partnerships, and the power asymmetry. What adds to it is the ‘fifth P’- the Pakistan factor which is often seen as the ‘source’ of conflict, but as per Kanti Bajpai, the close China-Pakistan relationship is an outcome (effect than cause) of the India-China conflict and not otherwise.

In the context of the ‘four Ps’, the author makes the following arguments. First, in considering the ‘perceptions of the Indian and Chinese elites’, Bajpai argues that India and China ties have transformed from being perceived as that of a respectful relationship in ancient times to a less respectful view of each other in the modern and contemporary times (p. 60). Furthermore, Bajpai strongly posits that in Chinese world views based on the concepts of ‘*tianxia*, communism and great power’, India is seen in a ‘secondary or subordinate’ role and not as a ‘fellow great power’.

Second, the differences in perimeters are anchored in the unresolved border, wherein even after seventy years, the two countries have failed to come to an agreement on the delineation of the border, on the status of Tibet, and on appropriate military actions and behaviours. In Bajpai’s view, the ‘inability to agree’ or ‘continuous disagreement’ between the two countries can be understood from a four-fold perspective: lack of trust in either’s intentions and actions, a zero-sum view of security,

cognitive dissonance and, neither political leadership has the ability and courage to handle nationalist domestic opinion. As these factors continue to prevail, Bajpai suggests that “[a]nother confrontation along the border is therefore quite possible” (p. 136).

Third, on the issue of partnership, Bajpai posits that India and China’s policies towards each other are driven not just by negative perceptions and territorial differences but over their partnerships with the USSR/Russia and the US. The two countries were never on the same sides except for two brief periods of parallel and compatible interests- in the early 1950s and after the Cold War from 1989-1998. Apart from these brief periods, India and China have never been allies of true strategic partners against either USSR/Russia or the US. In Bajpai’s words, “change is the only constant” in India and China’s respective partnerships vis-à-vis Russia and the US.

Finally, on power asymmetry, Bajpai posits that India and China are “far apart” in terms of economy, soft power attraction and military. Here, the key is a comprehensive national power, in which China has an upper hand - being seven times that of India’s. Owing to this, Bajpai suggests that unless India “substantially closes the power gap, there is less prospect of a lasting rapprochement” between New Delhi and Beijing (p. 220). Power differences matter- wherein neither the weaker power nor the stronger power is willing to make concessions.

Drawing from the ‘four Ps’ framework, Kanti Bajpai in the concluding Chapter contextualises the Eastern Ladakh crisis by positing the query: Was the crisis triggered by Chinese: perceptions, worries over India’s infrastructure along the perimeter (the border), response to India-US strategic partnership or, demonstration of power. While the queries still remain to be answered but Bajpai argues that “India-China relations always seem to be framed by a combination of these four elements” (p. 221). This brings forth the perennial query: What holds for the future of India-China ties?

Broadly drawn from the existing literature (mainly western and Indian) and his personal anecdotes, Kanti Bajpai's book makes a comprehensive and timely read. However, the missing point is reference to Chinese sources – which makes the only caveat. Nonetheless, written cogently and with lucidity, the book makes a significant value addition to the existing literature on India-China relations. With its four-fold framework of assessment, the book is a necessary read for students of international relations, academicians, policymakers and anyone who is keen on understanding India-China ties.

