

## Book Review

# An Astute Perspective on Ties with China

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*The Long Game: How the Chinese Negotiate with India,*  
Vijay Gokhale. Vintage by Penguin Random House India, 2021. Pp. 200.  
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Two heads of state or governments standing together for a shake hand and smile, or a walk or tea session make for memorable moments in bilateral diplomatic histories. However, a lot of backroom negotiations take place before such meetings. Negotiations, when successful, help resolve pressing political and economic questions, build a working relationship and pave the way for leadership summits. Even then, little is known about who plays what role in these negotiations, what sort of bargaining happens and what issues are left for the future and why. This process and what goes into this, is something which is never really known by people outside the official foreign policy establishment and has remained kind of a mystery to outsiders. Considerable information can be found in the diplomatic files and documents that may or may not make their way to the archives even 30 years later. As a consequence, and especially in the case of India, much of diplomatic history is in the forms of hearsay, self-praise and the bits released through coffee calls with favourite journalists. This leads to problems like gaps between public, private and academic perceptions, fake news and an uncritical acceptance of official positions.

India and China are geographical neighbours and given their size, ambitions and the unresolved issues, there is a sense of inevitability attached to any developments in this relationship. Both are important rising nations in the regional as well as global context and their bilateral relationship has the ability to impact world politics. Given

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their respective sizes and ambitions, this is clearly the most consequential relationship for India and Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a consequence, a lot tends to be written about it and in the last few years there has been a significant increase in the literature on this subject, especially on the issue of China's Rise and its implications for India. However, most of the literature which focusses on China comes from Western scholars and that tends to at times influence Indian perceptions of China.

Given the fact that China is the largest, and an assertive, neighbour, there is a scope for much more to be written on it by Indian scholars, diplomats, military officers and political leaders. Vijay Gokhale in his outstanding work *The Long Game: How the Chinese Negotiate with India* fills a big void and peels several layers from this nuanced and complicated relationship, and provides an informed Indian perspective on the ties with China. It helps the readers understand the challenges, the roadblocks and also the mishaps in this bilateral relationship. The author, who retired as India's Foreign Secretary, has had a long association with China in several capacities throughout his career, including as Ambassador to China. He brings a new perspective on Chinese diplomatic practice and strategy.

The book is divided into seven chapters, Recognition; Tibet: The Price of Friendship; Pokhran: How to Untie the Knot from Tiger's Neck; Sikkim: Half a Linguistic Pirouette; 123 Deal: The Big Turnabout; Masood Azhar: The Principle of Consensus and Lessons for India. Through them the author explores the mutual perceptions and negotiations between India and China from 1949 to 2019, a long period of seven decades. These two end points are also important landmarks in the India-China relationship.

### **China's Tactical Wins**

One of the major arguments made by the author is that the Chinese in their negotiations focus more on tactical 'wins' that would bring overall gains rather than focus on any major long-term agendas. Chinese have always looked for ways to strengthen their position step by step. An example of such an approach became apparent right at the beginning of the relationship. It was the point of recognition of the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). While India, under the leadership of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was more focussed on recognising the new Chinese government within a given time span, Beijing under Mao Tse-tung did not show any hurry to return the gesture. The author highlights, that the first few days of January

1950 underscored the differences between the two countries, while “China, was engaged in constant consultation and adjustment of tactics, the other, India, neither consulted nor felt the need to test presumptions against the responses they received from China. It reflected internal weakness in the governance of Indian Foreign policy and lack of experience in international negotiation” (pp. 17). This underscores the argument that the Chinese proved to be better negotiators when compared to their Indian counterparts. This is because they managed to gain significantly from their initial interaction without giving or even committing to anything in return. This also underscores the differences in the perspectives of the respective leaderships. Nehru was keener to appear friendly towards Beijing, while China was cautious and not readily trusting of Indian intentions.

The next chapter deals with the key issue of Tibet. The author argues that one of the major factors which pushed the PRC to invade Tibet was its politico-strategic intentions and distrust of India (pp. 24). New Delhi believed that it had to maintain good relations with PRC in the initial years and negotiate the Tibetan issue in the future. The Chinese, on the other hand, gained everything they wished by ‘probing the Indian thinking’ and engaging in “careful study and research” (pp.49). With the use of study, Beijing “decided to deal with India in a piecemeal fashion rather than in a comprehensive way” (pp. 49) and countered the Indian position in Lhasa. China also successfully managed to delegitimise the Shimla Agreement of 1914. The result has been that today the Dalai Lama with the Tibetan Government in exile and a large number of Tibetan refugees are in exile in India for the past 64 years.

Though the Chinese may think that the Tibetan issue has been dealt with, the role of India is still quite central. The fact that India welcomed the Dalai Lama and also extended support and reverence towards him, has been a major point of unease between New Delhi and Beijing. Beijing expected India to understand and respect its domestic concerns and saw the Indian position towards Tibet as an interference in its domestic politics.

Though, it appears that India did ‘lose’ to the Chinese negotiation techniques and strength and the 1962 war can be cited as an example of these failures a lot has changed since then. After 1962 there was a long pause when not much was discussed. It led to a major re-thinking within the Indian political and policy making circles towards China. There was a shift within the Indian approach and the era of Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai was definitely over and since then the relationship has been dominated by mistrust.

## Post-Pokhran Change

Things started to change after India established itself as a nuclear power by successfully conducting the Pokhran test. It is a known fact that Beijing was not 'very happy' with the Indian tests. As the author argues, the Chinese believed that "India was attempting to squeeze into the ranks of the nuclear states without caring for the price in terms of worsening India-China relations" (pp. 55). Though Beijing used all its international influence to 'punish' India, the Indian stand to "stay flexible with Americans and unwavering with China" proved to be successful (pp. 66). This can be regarded as the first successful negotiations by India, when it was able to uncover the real motive behind Chinese actions and also utilised the limited Chinese understanding of Indian domestic politics. One can argue that India had learnt how to deal with the Chinese counterpart and did find a successful route to get what it most wanted--an international acceptance of its nuclear tests.

The next chapter in the book looks at an important landmark in the negotiations on Sikkim. Though India strengthened its hold over the region during the 1970s and has regarded Sikkim as an inalienable part of India, it was only in 2005 that Beijing officially recognised Sikkim as a part of India. However, the final acceptance by Beijing can be considered a win for New Delhi and shows how the Indian establishment has come to understand the steps adopted by Beijing in any negotiation process. But the overall uncertainty over the unsettled border issue still looms large and its connection with the Sikkim issue is obvious. There is scepticism that if India opens Sikkim to China for trade and transit, Beijing will have no immediate need to resolve the border issue, as a path through Sikkim provides it with access to the Indian market and the India Ocean (pp. 88-91).

Some of the most recent negotiations which have gone in favour of New Delhi are the 123 Deal and the issue of Masood Azhar. The way these panned out highlighted that India had learnt to deal with the Chinese techniques. In both these cases Beijing stayed in the shadows and let other nations do its bidding, especially in multilateral organisations like the United Nations. This approach helped Beijing to not take the centre stage in any major issue. China also tries to prolong any final decisions, especially when dealing with democracies closer to elections. This prolonging provides Beijing with time as well as some leverage when dealing with any new government that comes to power. China believes that a new government in power will not be in a

strong position to take an assertive stance and thus may cater to its demands. However, in recent cases New Delhi proved that it has learnt from its past misjudgements and is now capable enough to use its bilateral as well as multilateral positions for securing favourable outcomes.

### **Fresh Perspective**

The book provides a new perspective by contextualising the India-China relationship. It is a must read for scholars and policymakers who want to understand China and those who engage with China in various capacities. With the help of multiple examples, the book highlights the shortcomings in the Indian understanding of China and how over time India has learnt to deal with the Chinese. One question which remains is that why is there no mention of any negotiation between 1960 and 1998? A period of almost four decades has not been discussed by the author.

The other question which looms large is why at a time when there has been a rise in political, diplomatic, economic and military interaction between India and China, there has also been a rise in the number of conflicts between the two countries. We can say that today New Delhi has a better grasp about the negotiating path and techniques used by Beijing. But we still see India reacting to Chinese overtures and actions, rather than being able to foresee them and pre-empt the Chinese. In a fast-changing international order, where the rules and priorities of nations and leaders change, can a set of pre-defined tools be regarded as sufficient? Is there a need to 'understand' China all over again?

With a change in the Chinese international position and power, Indian diplomacy will need new tools and new channels to understand and successfully negotiate with Beijing. The lesson from history is clear, as the book summarises: with change in the international order and Chinese domestic realities, China's negotiation techniques have evolved and so has its leverage. The more China becomes financially and militarily strong, New Delhi will need new tools to deal with Beijing. China is focussed on becoming an important international player as is obvious with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and it has been making inroads into South Asia. It is keen to shape its own set of terms and policies for the international order—political as well as economic. India too has to state its own terms and vision assertively.