India & China: Gap Analysis

BOOK REVIEW

Shyam Saran

If you need a compact and readable book about the trajectory of India-China relations, Kanti Baiapai's latest offering would be one of the best candidates. Dr Baiapai's book does not provide any fresh documentary or archival material but what he has done rather skilfully is to provide a useful conceptual frame within which to analyse the structural drivers of an essentially adversarial relationship between the two Asian giants. This framework has four key components that Dr Baiapai puts forward:

"Perceptions of each other; their territorial parameters, their strategic partnerships with the big powers, as well as the asymmetry of power between them." The book explores each of these themes in a systematic manner and offers a coherent and fairly persuasive picture of the nature of India-China relations, why they are and will remain adversarial for the foreseeable future and what may alter the balance between the two major powers.

With respect to perceptions, Dr Baiapai dwells on the links between the two countries through the spread of Buddhism into China, but what shapes contemporary Chinese perceptions is the country's exposure to Indian troops in the 19th and early 20th centuries. India falling under British colonial rule was blamed on the character of the Indian people, and its fate was something that China had to avoid at all costs. The territorial issue, in some way, is linked to the colonial period. China saw the border between the two countries as a legacy of British imperialism, to be renegotiated. India under Nehru was convinced that reopening such borders was a recipe for conflict and instability. India focused on legal issues, but China dealt with such issues politically. This also became entangled with the issue of the status of Tibet, with China interpreting India's insistence on Tibet's political and religious autonomy as aimed at overthrowing Chinese rule over the territory. This suspicion lingers.

The asymmetry of power element is easy to understand. As China's economic and military capabilities have outpaced India since the early 1990s, China has been less willing to accommodate Indian interests. China thinks of power in hierarchical terms and wants to ensure that China and India do not share power rankings, just as it demands acknowledgement as a peer power by the current superpower, the United States. And lastly, linked to the asymmetry of power, is India's need to engage in what is known in international relations theory as external balancing - that is, seek partnerships with other big powers to restrain the exercise of unilateral power by China. For this reason, India-US relations assume critical importance. Dr Baiapai predicts, with good reason, that the India-US relationship is likely to grow in the foreseeable future. In his treatment of the asymmetry of power, Dr Baiapai argues that contrary to what many Indians believe, China has also accumulated more "soft power" than India. He has cited several international surveys to buttress this argument. In a sense, soft power is an extension of economic and military power.

What about the future? Dr Baiapai argues that on present indications, India is unlikely to catch up with China over the next three decades and it could only have a credible opportunity to do so if it takes difficult and timely decisions and focuses single-mindedly on this objective. This requires a "will to power" which many observers believe India does not possess. Furthermore, how much can India depend on external balancing? Just as the power asymmetry between India and China is expanding, it is shrinking between the US and China. One should not exclude the possibility, which Dr Baiapai spells out, of a bipolar order, in which the two superpowers agree to share global power. If Asia is conceded as China's sphere of influence, the value of India-US partnership would be open to question. And could India withstand a much more aggressive and hostile China? Dr Baiapai is of the view that a large-scale war between the two countries is unlikely, but India must be prepared for many more Laddakh kind of operations. It should be able to hold the line in the north, and it still a major maritime presence in the Indian Ocean.

But this, too, may change in an adverse direction if the power asymmetry between the two countries continues to expand, leaving India far behind.

I wish to correct an error regarding Chinese history in the first chapter. The author states that by the early 18th century India-China interactions had declined "in part due to the Song Dynasty's decision at the height of its maritime imperialism, to discourage the voyages of Zheng He and other Chinese naval expeditions." Zheng He's voyages indeed took place in the early 15th century but they were under the Ming dynasty and not the earlier Song Dynasty. It was the Ming emperor Hongwu who suspended the voyages, ending China's 300-year dominance of the eastern oceans.

India Versus China is an honest and realistic appraisal of the nature and scope of the China challenge for India and what it would take to begin to address it if India is to avoid a subordinate place in a potentially China-dominated geopolitical universe.

The reviewer is a former foreign secretary and a senior fellow, CPR.