
BOOK REVIEW: A GAME FOR THE AGES

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Vijay Gokhale's book is a winner that leaves the audience wanting more

“The Chinese weigh their relative strength against the party with whom they are negotiating, and the process of negotiation from the preparation to the post-agreement stage will become important for Indian diplomacy.” This excerpt, taken from the concluding chapter, titled ‘Lessons for India’, underpins the core objective that Ambassador (Retd.) Vijay Gokhale aims at conveying through his book, ‘The Long Game: How the Chinese Negotiate with India’.

With six core chapters dissecting one case study each, the author weaves together a narrative from 1949 to the present time, ensuring to select only those cases as illustrations where closure in negotiations has been achieved. The book brings into deliberation how different heads of the Indian state have fared against China’s negotiating strategy. From Nehru and Vajpayee to Singh and Modi, Gokhale does not hesitate to draw strict inferences on their merits and demerits. The book extensively highlights how India’s diplomatic methods vis-a-vis China have evolved from lacking strategic thinking during the Nehruvian era to building a core foundation of foreign policy through the Rajiv and Vajpayee era; and finally countering Chinese negotiations and obtaining substantial gains during the Manmohan and Modi era.

Gokhale undertakes a lengthy explanation of why India’s recognition of the PRC marks a significant milestone in the diplomatic relations between the two countries. He elaborates how India, through the early years, became susceptible to the Chinese negotiation methods owing to the difference in diplomatic experience between them. While India had to wipe the slate clean and begin afresh with its foreign services, post-independence, the CCP was astute enough to retain former front-line diplomats from the previous regime as foreign policy consultants. This gave China an advantage that it exploited to the fullest. The quickness with which the CCP understood India’s desperation to recognize China and enhance its global stature helped the Chinese strategically play their cards, and ensure they attained their desired goals without ceding any ground in negotiations. Gokhale further cements that Nehru was so adamant to win over the Chinese goodwill, that he shut out any logical or sound suggestions provided to him by his deputy and other diplomats on how to approach the matter more sensibly. In the process, he mentions, ‘*India gave up some crucial negotiating cards*’, making this approach taken in the recognition of PRC a ‘*mixture of emotionalism and conjecture, without any strategy.*’

Following the bungled attempt with which India carried out its recognition process of PRC, the book turns its attention to the Tibet dilemma that the two states faced. Gokhale highlights how the

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Chinese were able to strategically maneuver their plans for the invasion of Tibet, countering the threat from the United States, whom they believed could assist Tibet in gaining independence. China and India had clear individual objectives for Tibet. India held that it de-facto replaced Great Britain regarding all treaty rights and obligations, thus making an argument for maintaining the status quo through the McMahon Line. Mao and China, on the other hand, were keen on invading the Tibetan region since the liberation of Sichuan and Xinjiang. Gokhale highlights how Mao never had a positive opinion of the Indian government and constantly viewed Nehru as an ‘imperialist collaborator’. This perception led the Chinese to adopt a double-edged strategy, one being to counter potential India-US collusion and the other, to counter India’s ambitions to maintain the status quo at the Tibetan borders. To pursue the same, China was able to convince India of the latter’s importance as a mediator in resolving tensions between the Tibetan and Chinese governments in an amicable fashion. It is through this case study that Gokhale highlights the artless and naïve strategy adopted by India against China, as in the end, India was depicted as the major roadblock in stalling the peace process and held liable for the invasion as an outcome, by the Chinese media.

What makes Gokhale’s work shine are the neatly-nit narratives of the six case studies, each of which carries the potential to be a stand-alone work by itself. The author builds a case for how India revisited and redefined its negotiating stratagem under the Vajpayee and subsequent governments and then proceeds to do good on this declaration by substantially backing it through illustrations of certain successful outcomes that India was able to attain. Tackling the Pokhran crisis; overcoming the NPT & NSG roadblocks through to the US-India 123 Deal, and the resilience shown in the listing of Masoor Azhar Alvi under the 1267 Sanctions Committee, are the few other case studies he elaborates on intensively in the book.

Through the US-India 123 deal, Gokhale highlights how China conducted negotiations on three levels. On one hand, the Chinese representatives were engaged with India in ‘strengthening their strategic alliance’ as communicated by Xi-Jinping to M.K Narayanan. While on the other, they focused on breaking apart NSG’s support to India by making a case for the ‘purists’ faction of the NSG to stand up for the principle of non-proliferation. It is at this juncture in the book that Gokhale highlights how India understood why the Chinese always conducted their negotiations from the shadows, playing the role of puppet master, rather than being in the limelight.

Having served as the former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador to the People’s Republic of China for an extensive period, Ambassador Vijay Gokhale holds an illustrious career under his belt. If anything, this book is a graceful trimming of illusions and reaffirmation of the cold and hardline approach which China has adopted in its dealings with India, historically. Over the years, there have been several engaging works on how these two South Asian countries pursued their foreign policies through negotiations. However, more often than not, they are tinted with a partisan perspective, given that most of these pieces originate from the West, where China is viewed as a smaller-growing power, in comparison to it being the bigger power when seen through the Indian lens. It is this gap in the existing literature that Ambassador Gokhale’s book fills by providing intricate insights accompanied by insider accounts into how the two nations have historically conducted their negotiations. Given the dynamic geopolitical climate of the Indo-Pacific currently, the relevance of Gokhale’s work amplifies now more than ever. While the book does well in highlighting specific facets of the Chinese negotiating stratagem, it also adds to its larger underlying theme, of how China and India’s foreign policy concerning each other has evolved over the years.

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References

Gokhale, V. (2021). *The Long Game: How the Chinese Negotiate with India*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited.