

China and Pakistan 'axistential' issues

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Business Standard (Mumbai)
January 20, 2016

"If India invades Pakistan, we would be willing to respond. If India launches air strikes on Pakistan, we would be willing to respond. If India threatens Pakistan with nuclear weapons we may even be willing to extend our nuclear umbrella to Pakistan, though we wouldn't be the first ones to use the 'n-word'. But when it's Pakistan that causes the problem we can't back them. What could we say after Mumbai? They obviously had military training. We couldn't defend that."

These words by a Chinese expert perfectly echo the popular perceptions about the nature of the China-Pakistan relationship.

Andrew Small's book *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* is a culmination of six years of work. It aims to provide "a starting point for thinking through the most important issues at stake" to understand the underpinnings of this relationship. The book achieves its stated aim through two means. One, it analytically explores this "all-weather friendship". Two, it provides an expansive view of the evolution of the enigmatic relationship between the two countries.

Off to a tentative start in the 1950s, the Sino-Pakistan relationship first changed course after India provided asylum to the Dalai Lama in 1959. It assumed a slightly different nature after India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests. The book deals with these issues by way of seven chapters that cover the India-centric nature of this relationship, China and Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan, the nuclear programme, troubles with terrorism, geo-economics and trade, and China's evolution into a regional stabiliser.

The chapters dedicated to the Chinese war on terror, the Sino-Pakistan nuclear collaboration and the grand economic projects between the two sides are the highlights of the work.

In explaining China's worries in Xinjiang - China's only Muslim majority province - Mr Small shows that Beijing's tendency to attribute any act of violence in the region to separatists blur the line between terrorism and activism. In turn, the chapter successfully proves to the reader the credibility problem that China faces in dealing with the region.

While describing the joint effort to help the mujahideen in the 1980s against the Soviets, the author rightly concludes that the legacy of this era is the "rise of a state apparatus" that manages well-trained and well-armed militant groups.

The chapter on the Sino-Pakistani nuclear collaboration presents the complex roles played by Russia, India, and the USA that led to nuclearisation. The chapter begins like a thriller. Beginning in Tripoli, two plastic bags containing step-by-step instructions to assemble a bomb are handed over to the personnel responsible for disarmament efforts in Libya. The deal cut by Muammar Gaddafi with the UK and US to ensure the lifting of sanctions against Libya resulted in this handover that exposed A Q Khan's proliferation of nuclear technologies in the black market. Further, a number of documents in these plastic

bags were in Chinese, thereby confirming the collaboration between the two countries. The author goes on to explain the history and the factors behind this collaboration that has ensured an "unusual level of trust between the two countries".

One important myth that Mr Small debunks (as he did in an interview to this newspaper on December 11, 2015) is of an "all-weather friendship" by citing China's lack of military adventurism on Pakistan's behalf and its response (or lack thereof) during the Kargil war or the Mumbai terror attacks. This is in spite of China providing Pakistan its "ultimate means of self-defence", the Bomb.

The chapter on economic issues is titled "The trade across the roof of the world", a reference to the claim made about the Sino-Pak friendship - via the completion of the Karakoram Highway - being "higher than the highest mountain". This section reflects on how the rise of Chinese economic might has not resulted in strengthening of the economic ties, i.e., close political ties have not translated into closer commercial ties. In contrast, Sino-Indian trade in 2015 stood at \$73 billion, whereas the Sino-Pak trade numbers tell us a disappointing story.

Another noteworthy aspect of the book is the research process the author follows. Relying largely on interviews, the book is laced with juicy anecdotes. The risk of entering the gossip-zone, however, is mitigated with the help of perspectives from multiple sources from different sides. In fact, the author ensures the reader that he has "two separate reliable sources for all interview-based claims".

In spite of thin cultural and economic relations, the China-Pakistan axis has proven to be resilient, and India has been dealing with this since the 1960s. Mr. Small's book fills a much-needed gap in this lesser-known area of study. A pertinent conclusion that he draws is about China's inability to maintain alliances and about how Pakistan is the only country that has managed to fill this lacuna. Hence, the book is particularly relevant for anyone who wishes to understand this complicated relationship.

Several important events have occurred since the publication of the first edition of the book, a key one being the start of the multi-billion dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Although the project is billed as a commercial venture, it has major geopolitical significance. So, one must wait to see how CPEC can change the coordinates of this axis.

Source: http://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/china-and-pakistan-axistential-issues-116012001195_1.html