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Book Review

BOOK REVIEW

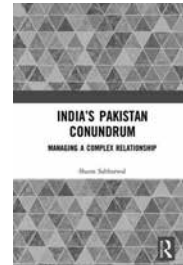
**India's Pakistan Conundrum: Managing a
Complex Relationship**

Author: Sharat Sabharwal

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SHALINI CHAWLA

India-Pakistan relations continue to be strained with predictable exchange of statements at regular intervals. While there have been brief phases of stability in the bilateral relationship, by and large the relations have remained disturbed and trust deficit continues to dominate the thinking on both sides of the border. Sustained bilateral tensions have altered the security dynamics in the region. Pakistan's preferred low-cost strategy of using covert war through terrorism as a foreign policy tool and efforts to restrain India's engagement in Afghanistan has contributed largely to Kabul being the hub of terrorist activities. This also raises challenges for a regional approach for counterterrorism.

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Although varying degrees of intensity in tensions have been a constant feature with the two nuclear neighbours, the relations are at their nadir at the moment with complete absence of a diplomatic dialogue. The dialogue has not been revived after the Pathankot attack in January 2016. Revocation of article 370 by India on August 5, 2019 has intensified the tensions and there has been massive frustration and anger expressed by Pakistani leadership.

The last six years have witnessed increasing discomfort in the bilateral relationship. There are multiple studies and varied perspectives on the complex India-Pakistan relationship. Sharat Sabharwal's book, *India's Pakistan Conundrum: Managing a Complex Relationship*, is a study based on experience of a practitioner, offers fascinating insights contributing to the understanding of the state of Pakistan and debates potential options to deal with the challenges of the stressed bilateral relationship. The book is a comprehensive analysis of the India-Pakistan relations and an easy read for anyone who wants to understand the inherent problems within Pakistan and the complexity of the bilateral relations.

The author summarises the book in his introduction aptly: "It [Pakistan] craves parity with India, in spite of the obvious difference in size and potential and, in this quest, has nurtured itself into a national security and rentier state, ready to do the bidding of the external patron, willing to underwrite its ambitions vis-à-vis India financially and militarily, even at the cost of interest of its people." (p. 1)

The statement captures the objectives of Pakistan, the path it wants to adopt of seeking external patrons and the cost that it is ready to pay in terms of undermining the welfare of its people. To pursue the stated objectives of seeking parity with India, Pakistan has been willing to compromise its economic growth and welcome the strategic partnerships aimed at neutralising India. Constant neglect of human capital and economy has enhanced Pakistan's insecurities and challenges.

The first part of the book, with detailed six chapters, analyse the internal dynamics of Pakistan: the state of Pakistan, identity crisis, military's efforts to strengthen the identity crisis, antipathy towards India, religious extremism, ethnic fault lines, and Pakistan's

dependence on the external powers to deal with the hostility against India.

The second part of the book discusses India-Pakistan relations and India's policy options in a rather unique fashion. Mr Sharat Sabharwal, who served as High Commissioner to Pakistan (2009-2013), has very lucidly analysed India's policies and the efficacy of New Delhi's strategy vis-à-vis Pakistan. India has fought four conventional wars with Pakistan, has been fighting Pakistan's sub-conventional war for more than five decades, but has limited answers when it comes to effectively dealing with Pakistan. China's strategic alliance with Pakistan which started as a purely military alliance and has eventually expanded into the economic and, very importantly, diplomatic domain, has added complexity to the India-Pakistan relations.

The book dives deep into the structural problems within Pakistan: the military supremacy, religious extremism and the blowback of the strategies Pakistan has pursued to fulfil its objective of staying at par with India and neutralising India's conventional capability. Interestingly, the book discusses some crucial trends in Pakistan, suggesting to the reader that the reversal of Pakistan's journey has limited possibilities. One of the main challenges highlighted by the author is the education system in Pakistan which caters to teaching a (strategically driven) distorted version of Islam at the madrassas and projects India as an enemy (in the school textbooks). In Pakistan, the leadership has used education as a medium to build the anti-India narrative and spread hate against India (and Hindus) in the young minds. The madrassa education underwent a radical shift during General Zia-ul-Haq's tenure (in the 1980s) to gather support from the religious groups. The education system has been moulded to cater to state's strategic objectives, and this in turn has allowed extremism to take strong roots in society. The issue of terrorism has been discussed comprehensively by the author citing interesting incidents and facts.

While the book discusses multiple facets of the Pakistani state, perhaps the most distinct contribution of the book is that it attempts to bust some commonly debated/discussed myths or notions regarding changing the dynamics of the strained India-Pakistan relations.

One of the most frequently asked questions while discussing Pakistan has been: *Is Pakistan a failing state or a failed state?* The author defines the failed state according to the Oxford Dictionary: “a state whose political or economic system has become so weak that the government is no longer in control.” (p. 85) This is certainly not the case with Pakistan where the institutions assert themselves in critical situations to guard their sanctity. The author very correctly calls Pakistan a ‘dysfunctional state’.

Opening trade with Pakistan is often debated as a potential tool for bringing stability in the relationship. Following the Pulwama terror attacks in February 2019, India withdrew the MFN status given to Pakistan and enhanced trade tariff on imports from Pakistan by 200%. Pakistan, in response to abrogation of Article 370, suspended bilateral trade in August 2019. The author provides the history of trade between the two nuclear neighbours and concludes that, “Given the complexity of India’s relationship with Pakistan trade by itself cannot be a game changer. Nonetheless, it remains an important policy tool.” (p. 148)

Enhancing *people to people bonhomie* is another option which generates ample debates. Author very candidly discusses the inability of this initiative to produce dramatic results in improving the relationship. Sharat Sabharwal writes, “Reaching out to the Pakistani people and people to people contacts remain an important policy option for India, to be deployed in conjunction with other instrumentalities.” (p. 159)

Since military is the main power centre in Pakistan and the foreign policy is driven by the military, it is proposed by some analysts that India should *engage directly with the Pakistan military*. The author clarifies with examples in the past that unless the strategic objectives of the military and national objectives of Pakistani state are altered India’s engagement with the military will have little impact.

Lastly, and very importantly, the author with his mature understanding highlights why the *break-up of nuclear Pakistan* is not in India’s favour and the disintegration of Pakistan would have repercussions on India.

The author discusses the strengths of Pakistan, its attractive geopolitical location which make it strategically important for the major powers—the United States and China; and the large pool of bright and talented people whose positive potential has been underutilised in the military-run state and opinions have been shaped by the anti-India propaganda.

Undoubtedly the book debates very significant and complex aspects of the India-Pakistan relations. While I am in agreement with most of the points discussed by the author, I have a different take on India's Balakot airstrikes not calling out Pakistan's nuclear bluff. It's correct to say that the Balakot airstrikes did not alter Pakistan's nuclear dynamics or nuclear thinking or, for that matter, Pakistan's nuclear posture. But the purpose of the surgical strikes was to convey a strong message of India's political will to use conventional capability in retaliation to Pakistan's act of terror and, more importantly, to create a space for conventional war above terrorism and below the nuclear threshold. And this was undeniably successfully achieved by India.

While the book is very elaborate in the range of issues it manages to address, I feel the author's insights into Pakistan's anti-India narrative at the global level, its projection of victimhood and threat perceptions, justification of use of terror, to the outside world, and Pakistan's call for Islamophobia would have been a valuable addition to the book.

The book is an excellent read and the author, after providing all the details and discussing various policy options for India, leaves his readers with a strong message that Pakistan is here to stay, and India needs to learn to deal with it. Like a fine diplomat, Ambassador Sharat Sabharwal advocates dialogue with Pakistan as a means to contain violence and tensions.