

Press Release

“The asymmetries between India and China are structural and that means the relationship will remain difficult”: Kanti Bajpai at a CSEP Discussion

**29 June 2021,
New Delhi:**

Speaking at a Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) [panel discussion](#) around his new book, *India Versus China: Why They Are Not Friends*, Kanti Bajpai, Wilmar Professor of Asian Studies at the Lee Kuan Yew (LKY) School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore (NUS) explained why an amicable India-China relationship is opposed by structural factors that are fundamental to the relationship.

Chaired by Shivshankar Menon, Former National Security Advisor and Distinguished Fellow, CSEP, the discussion featured the author, Kanti Bajpai, Tanvi Madan, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, Jabin Jacob, Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations and Governance Studies at the Shiv Nadar University, and Antara Ghosal Singh, Research Associate, CSEP, with closing remarks from Constantino Xavier, Fellow, CSEP.

The discussion partly revolved around the four Ps that Bajpai refers to in his book: the negative **perceptions** amongst the elite, differences over **perimeters**, the **partnerships** shared by them in the global context, and the growing asymmetry in their **powers**.

Referring to the perception or “unease in China about India,” Bajpai added that “there is a sneaking [Chinese] feeling that India is kind of a luan [confused] nation,” however, at the same time there is an apprehension that, “if it gets its act together, it could turn things around. An example is how India will be overtaking China in terms of population.”

“India and China share common worries on the multilateral stage, such as climate change...they don’t spill over in the bilateral relationship,” he said. Bajpai emphasised that, “The asymmetries between India and China are structural and that means the relationship will remain difficult.” Answering a question on how a change in Chinese leadership could affect the relationship, he said, “If Xi is replaced by someone who does not have that kind of control, the situation could be worse [for India]. However, a more powerful Xi will also mean bad news for India-China relations.”

On the subject of disdainful perceptions between the two nations, Shivshankar Menon pointed out that, “If Chinese had such disdain for India, they wouldn’t need to put so much effort into their relationship with Pakistan” and they wouldn’t do “what they did in Ladakh.” “It seems to me the more they [China] try and convey disdain is the more seriously they actually take us” he added. He also said that some of the “otherwise inexplicable” choices during the “pivotal moments in the India China relationship (1959, 62, 86, 89, 2017, 2020)” were driven by the internal politics of both India and China.

Commenting on the role public opinion plays between the two nations, Jabin Jacob said, “It is fascinating how adept the two governments are at ignoring or playing up — China more than India — public opinions and perceptions as a factor that affects policy in their relationship.” On the future of India’s China policy, he expressed his concern, noting that, “In every [past] crisis with China, we [India] have managed to come up better because we have faced up to the crisis. My fear today is that we are trying to run away from facing up to the crisis...that is a big challenge for academics, policymakers, bureaucracy, military, in general.”

Bringing in the aspect of US influence on the India-China relationship, Tanvi Madan said, “China is seeing India through a competition with the US-prism and that is shaping its decisions.” She recognised that, “It suits the US that China and India have divergences, but it is a goldilocks challenge.” It is also not in US interests for India and China to go to war, she added.

Referring to the “ideological challenge” that India’s success as a democracy poses for China, she added that, “even if the boundary dispute is solved tomorrow, the competition is not going away because there are a series of bilateral differences.” On the question of future co-operation, she said “We (India) should be realistic about the engagement (with China). We are not going to be friends, but we need to be neighbours.”

On the polarised perceptions in China, Antara Ghosal Singh said, “There is much Chinese popular negativity towards India but there is also widespread insecurity about India’s rise. ... more nationalist analyses project India not merely as a country but as a geographical region, a British imperialist construct.” However, she noted that “the trend in China is to have a more objective, balanced understanding of India as the China-India relationship becomes more important even in the Chinese strategic imagination.”

For media enquiries, please contact:

Zehra Kazmi

Email: zkazmi@csep.org