

Contours of A Volatile Relationship

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THE CHINA-INDIA RIVALRY IN THE GLOBALIZATION ERA

Edited by T.V. Paul

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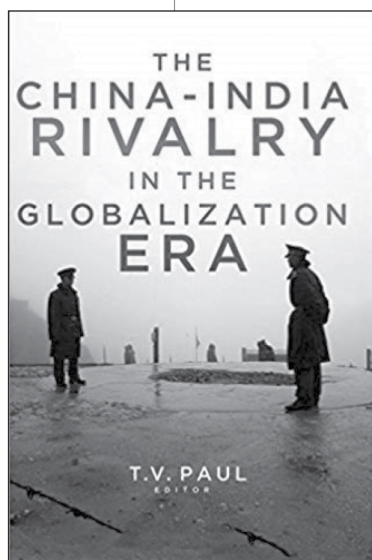
A veritable explosion in books offering China-India comparisons is a sign of the times. The two Asian giants offer strong similarities and contrasts, which belies an approximate 5-to-1 difference in the size of their economies. And it is the blend of contestation and cooperation in their relationship that intrigues researchers, in scanning the future for Asia and world affairs.

In a comprehensive introductory chapter, Professor TV Paul calls this relationship a 'managed rivalry', and searches for a theory that might capture 'the dynamics of this rivalry'. He focuses on a 'growing asymmetrical interdependence' between China and India. He is intrigued that China's rapid rise in the post-Cold War era did not produce a decline in its relationship with India. A short answer to that is of course the interplay of other major power relationships, and a need for each player in this dynamic, multi-dimensional global game to find its own balancing equations with other major powers, in order to maximize opportunities for itself.

Paul contrasts two dyads, China-India and India-Pakistan, declaring that unlike in the former, 'Pakistan, the weaker party in the India-Pakistan rivalry, steadfastly opposes any economic concessions or deep interactions with India...there is no vigorous challenger in the China-India dyad, unlike in the India-Pakistan dyad...' (pp. 5-6). In South Asia, the term 'dyad' is not widely used, except among academics, while it is used to describe a two-state cluster, it also implies a connection between that pair (one dictionary definition speaks of a

'sociologically significant relationship'¹). In the case of India-Pakistan, the cultural, linguistic and ethnic connections are profound; it is those connections that add much to mutual bitterness and emotion between the two, as with any 'family' dispute. This element also needs consideration. One may also add that the analysis presented in this book does not go to the next connected and important point that Pakistan's actions go much beyond a vigorous challenge to India. In fact, this country has become a global hub of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorist sponsorship, threatening not just India but also Afghanistan and the wider region; this deserves attention. For Paul, India is developing Chabahar port in Iran 'in a bid to circumvent Pakistan' (p. 4); a more complete statement might have noted Pakistan's denial of land-transit facilities for India to access Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Besides the Introduction, the book has three parts. Part II consists of six chapters that look at different sources of China-India rivalry, while Part III examines the strategic dimension of the relationship; Part IV



looks at the 'mitigators', namely the impact of trade and investments, and the international engagement of the two. The final chapter offers conclusions. Part II opens with Mukesh Shankar's essay on territory and the China-India dispute. Challenges to its resolution are 'real' and include 'rivalry dynamics (however asymmetrical), status concerns, historical memory and domestic politics'; he calls the dispute 'at the same time both intractable and

manageable' (p. 34). Shankar calls Tibet 'an additional dimension to the territorial disagreements between China and India' (p. 36); AS Bhasin's archival document study shows that Tibet became in fact central to that dispute.² The essay adds: 'following the [1962] war diplomatic ties with China were broken by New Delhi and it took another two decades for the two sides to even attempt to re-establish a certain level of civil normality between each other' (p. 45). The facts are different. Owing to deteriorating

1. See: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dyad>

2. See: Avtar Singh Bhasin, ed., *India-China Relations 1947-2000: A Documentary Study*, (five volumes), Geetika Publishers, New Delhi, 2018

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relations, India withdrew its ambassador from Beijing in August 1961, and China followed suit shortly thereafter. Though the two countries sent back their ambassadors only in 1976, full diplomatic relations subsisted throughout this period and each country was ably represented in the other capital. Further, between September 1961 and December 1963, Premier Zhou Enlai had 11 substantive meetings with the Indian Chargé affairs, PK Banerjee, using him as the major communication channel with India.³ After the 1962 war, substantive bilateral dialogue continued, and this played a role during the 1971 Bangladesh War. This is a gratuitous inaccuracy in a fine essay.

Again and again, the book deals with the paradox of interstate rivalry between China and India, partly mitigated by growing mutual cooperation, in which new elements of mutual antipathy also emerge, to add further complications. This produces shifting images, and ambiguous outcomes. One chapter looks at the asymmetry in international status between China and India, offering the conclusion that mutual rivalry on this count can be mitigated, because status is not simply a zero-sum game. Another looks at the views of each on the international order. It becomes evident that in contrast to China's official statements on its global goals, Indian views are couched in indirect language, to be gleaned from dispersed statements and from analytical writing by scholars. India simply does not unambiguously set out either its foreign policy strategic objectives or its international order prescriptions.

The 'balancing strategies' deployed by the two countries are examined in another essay, this term refers to foreign affairs actions designed to stabilize a crisis, and are further divided into 'hard' and 'soft' actions

3. See: PK Banerjee, *My Peking Memoirs of The Chinese Invasion of India* (Clarion, Delhi, 1990)

(e.g., enhanced military buildup, focus on ties with other countries and institutional actions). It is noteworthy also that hard balancing actions can lead to ‘internalizing’ a crisis, which further complicates its resolution. The net conclusion: China and India have focused more on soft than hard strategies, including actions that build their economic relationship. This essay notes that some Chinese Foreign Ministry advisors describe this as akin to a football match rather than a zero-sum boxing match. This is an elegant description for the activities that this book seeks to capture.

Africa has become one of the staging grounds for a protracted contest. An essay looks at this subject; one that deserves detailed study, if only one can pierce through clouds of confusing, partial and contesting information. Often overlooked in such narratives are the varied African perspectives—for which an essay in this compilation cannot be faulted. This theme deserves longer and detailed analysis. Are the two engaged in a contest over African resources? Or, to take up a point not covered in this book, does India offer a superior model of shared partnership, which transfers technology and builds African skills? This merits study.

A scholar based at Singapore, Selina Ho looks at the water issues between the two countries. This is another understudied subject. India already suffers from water stress, with an average of 1545 cu. m³. of water resources per capita. China’s average availability is around 1800 to 2000 m³ which puts it just above the water stress level. The two countries have no mechanism for riparian cooperation, no water sharing agreement or joint commission. The principal reason is China’s reluctance to enter into riparian cooperation with any country, given its geographic status principally as an upper riparian. The essay concludes that ‘armed conflict over water is a possibility, even if rather remote’ (p. 193). Not mentioned here is China’s enormous capacity for water engineering projects, including major river diversions, such as its South-North water project that takes water from the Yangtze river, 1430 km. to the Beijing region.⁴ While not likely in the short run, the danger of China embarking on a major venture to divert Brahmaputra waters towards its heartland to the east cannot be overlooked.

Part III examines the strategic culture and milieu of the two countries, which

4. See: <https://www.economist.com/china/2018/04/05/china-has-built-the-worlds-largest-water-diversion-project>

‘while not the source of their conflict, they exacerbate and prolong the rivalry into a chronic condition’ (p. 22). The concluding essay focuses on the nature of the China-India asymmetry, probing into the issues that underline their rivalry. The two power asymmetry between the countries, in terms of a ‘Composite Index of National Capability’, plotted over the years shows a difference in China’s favour that varies between 4 to 1, to around 2.5 to 1 (using six indicators, economic, military, demographic, and others). One conclusion, this rivalry is rooted more on notions of status, rather than capability. But some would question another conclusion that India’s primary rivalry is with Pakistan and not China.

The essay notes that there has been a diminution of hostility between the two sides over the last two or three decades, and that this amounts to rivalry decline. While this chapter looks at several elements that have led to a diminution in China-India rivalry, including the end of the Cold War, it does not consider a key factor, namely India’s launch of economic reforms in 1991, which has led to a major reordering of its domestic and international priorities. Its net conclusion: the China-India rivalry might ‘represent a change of tactics away from traditional military confrontation towards new forms of competition as many of the sources of conflict persist’ (p. 329).

This book is noteworthy for the quality and range of its essays, and a balanced analysis of a complex subject. It should attract wide readership.

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Fateful Triangle: How China Shaped U.S.-India Relations During the Cold War by Tanvi Madan argues that China’s influence on the U.S.-India relationship is neither a recent

nor a momentary phenomenon. Drawing on documents from India and the United States, she shows that American and Indian perceptions of and policy toward China significantly shaped U.S.-India relations in three crucial decades, from 1949 to 1979. A key question today is whether the United States and India can, or should develop ever-closer ties as a way of countering China’s desire to be the dominant power in the broader Asian region. *Fateful Triangle* argues that history shows such a partnership is neither inevitable nor impossible.

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