



Book Review

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Tien-Sze Fang, *Asymmetrical Threat and Perceptions in India–China Relations*. Oxford University Press, 2014, 237 pp., Rupees 795, ISBN 139780198095958.

A dominant feature of 21st-century world politics has been the rise of India and China as the two Asian superpowers (p. 1). The book under review provides an insightful analysis of the shared security perceptions of the two countries. Both states have been trying to expand their own influence in South Asia, which has resulted in a deep-rooted rivalry between them. This is a factor that impinges strongly upon the national security of both countries, and thereby upon the regional and international order. The book under review provides the reader with fascinating insights about the Sino-Indian relations, and addresses the question as to why China and India have not been able to develop a long-term, stable and friendly relationship. The book is authored by a Taiwanese diplomat-scholar. It reflects his deep understanding about China, with which Taiwan has had a distinctive relationship based on a mix of national identity, historical acrimony, power and economic disparities, and their relations with the United States.

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The book offers the reader with a constructivist understanding of India–China relations. It is a fascinating analysis of the shared threat perceptions of the two countries. It covers all the key dimensions of bilateral ties that impair a stable relationship, such as the nuclear debate, the border dispute, the Tibet issue, regional competition and cooperation and lastly, India–China relations in the global context. The author observes that the instability in India–China relations largely stems from the difference in their threat perceptions. It therefore follows that the future prospect of forging closer New Delhi–Beijing political links hinges on a convergence of the security perceptions of the two states.

The author provides the reader with a new perspective for understanding India–China relations by highlighting the asymmetry of the threat perceptions between the two countries. He observes that India tends to be deeply apprehensive of the China threat, while China appears comparatively unconcerned about India as a threat (p. 9). Furthermore, the developments of close Sino-Indian relations are constrained by this disparity between their threat perceptions. This disparity results in a dilemma for India. In such circumstances, states either “bandwagon” with powerful states (forging military alliances), or seek a constructive engagement and “confidence building measures” (CBM) with the potential adversary to mitigate the threat. Besides, the weaker of two states would invariably attempt to reduce the asymmetry by enhancing its capabilities.

In the context of India–China relations, India will try to reduce the sense of insecurity by adopting appropriate measures as part of its overall coping strategy vis-à-vis China. These measures may include building of national power – military or economic or both – and also involve India forging partnerships with other states. This explains India’s progressive military development along with its efforts to forge cooperative relationships with other states extending from the Western Pacific to Indian Ocean. However, India has been cautious so as not to create unwarranted anxieties in Beijing. On the contrary, China is not in a mood to share India’s security concerns, including in terms of New Delhi’s anxieties to settle its long-outstanding land border dispute.

India’s nuclear tests of 1998 brought about a new phase in China–India relations. China’s nuclear capability has been a major source of India’s “China threat” perception. Along with China-supported and sustained Pakistan’s nuclear capability, this exacerbated the divergence of threat perceptions between the two countries. Therefore, economic and other sanctions did not deter India when it opted to

become a nuclear state. The conduct of the tests was a major step to address its strategic asymmetry vis-à-vis China, and it allowed India to approach the bilateral problems in a more confident manner. The author notes that China is not so much concerned about a nuclear threat posed by India, as much as New Delhi's attempts to secure a *de jure* nuclear power status. Also, while China is confident of maintaining a favourable asymmetry in its comprehensive power vis-à-vis India, what worries China is India's improved security ties with the USA. China's adversarial relationship with the USA leads to a significant strategic convergence between India and the USA in dealing with China (p. 196).

The Tibet issue has been an endless source of friction between China and India, and has been a significant factor in shaping their mutual threat perceptions. China has been able satisfactorily to address neither the apprehensions of the Tibetan populace nor the global community on its intentions with regard to Tibet. China has little control on international media that reports on Tibet and Dalai Lama. This sense of inadequacy clearly creates a perception of threat in the Chinese politico-military leadership. Tibet is presently the second largest autonomous region for China after Xinjiang. India has officially recognized Tibet as a part of China by signing the 1954 agreement. Hence, even though India maintained a benign stance on Tibet, the Tibetan issue has been part of China's perception of an extant asymmetric threat to its national sovereignty.

China and India have been paying a heavy price for the unresolved border dispute, which has seriously undermined bilateral relations, and has been a major factor in India's perception of the "China threat". The competing claims of the two sides over the land border dispute and the Tibet issues strained Sino-Indian relations, which led to a brief but noteworthy war in October 1962. India suffered severe reverses in the war. India has since been wary of China as its biggest threat. In recent years, a series of events have rekindled the dispute and has led to a new cycle of accusations and tensions. Among these are statements by political leaders in Beijing asserting China's claim to the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh (as "South Tibet") and China's denial of visas to Indian officials belonging to Arunachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir. While China-India military CBMs may have helped maintain a transient peace along the border, these have not served to narrow down the divergence of threat perceptions. Nonetheless, since China and India are still far from being friendly neighbours, the CBMs constitute an achievement that deserves applause.

Even though the land border dispute is far from being resolved, China is more reassured. Unlike India, it does not consider the border dispute as a serious challenge to its security. On the other hand, the memory of the 1962 war continues to torment the Indians. New Delhi is eager to resolve the boundary issue by progressively delineating the LAC through specifically agreed time-lines. In contrast, Beijing has demonstrated little enthusiasm to settle the dispute. As a result, the boundary problem has further aggravated India's "China threat" perception. An unresolved border dispute would continue to drain India's attention and resources. Maintaining *status quo* along the border seems to be the best that India can hope for in the foreseeable future.

The Indian sub-continent has become a "battle ground" for India and China, each trying to assert its power and influence on the sub-region, which includes India's immediate neighbours. China has been continually providing nuclear assistance to Pakistan, has a presence in Sri Lanka and this coupled with its actions in other neighbouring countries such as Nepal, Myanmar and Maldives have stoked India's security concerns with regard to China's intentions. India is concerned that China may be seeking to straightjacket India within the confines of South Asia. On the other hand, China is dismissive of any Indian challenge or regional competition based on its substantial relative superiority in terms of its Comprehensive National Power (CNP), particularly its economic and military dimensions.

Notwithstanding the above, China is mindful of India's potential as a power of consequence, and its growing relationship with major powers, including China's immediate maritime neighbours like Japan and the Southeast Asian countries. This has led Beijing increasingly to engage New Delhi on various issues, such as economic cooperation and anti-terrorism. These developments, along with China's cautious neutrality during past India–Pakistan armed conflicts, suggest that India and China may be willing to scale down the adversarial potential in their relationship. However, events in POK (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir) indicate otherwise. China is making substantial investments in the Gilgit–Baltistan region (POK) through sponsorship of various "development projects". This "development activity" involves a sizable number of Chinese troops belonging to the construction corps of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) – a pointer towards China's expansionist intent in its regional geo-strategic calculus. This move by China is also likely to hamper any future India–Pakistan agreement to resolve the status of Jammu and Kashmir. In the coming years,

the two countries could act as both competitors and regional partners in regional affairs, depending upon the dictates of their respective national interests.

China and India have a shared identity as rising powers. Both are vying for influence in regional and international affairs. China showed its hand against India by working against its proposed permanent membership of the UN Security Council. A considerable gap exists between the aspirations of India and China, as well as between their actions. They do not seem to share the same perceptions on regional and global security issues. At the same time, it is amply clear that neither of the two seek a military confrontation. Nonetheless, threat perceptions would continue to play an important part for both countries to manage their complex relationship, which bears a mix of both conflict and cooperative elements.