

BOOK REVIEWS

***China and India: Great Power Rivals.* By Mohan Malik. Boulder & London: First Forum Press, 2011. Hardcover: 467pp.**

Analyses of the changing global power balance have focused largely on the rise of China and the relative decline of American power. There is a growing literature on the rise of India as a third power trailing behind them, but detailed scholarly analyses on the China-India relationship are far fewer. Mohan Malik's *China and India: Great Power Rivals* comes as a welcome contribution. An unabashed realist who believes in the centrality of power and interest in an international system that privileges conflict over cooperation, Malik rubbishes the notion of "Chindia" — a condominium of the two rising states — as wishful thinking. More broadly, he rejects the liberal notion that the world is shifting towards interdependence and multilateralism and argues that on-going shifts in the global balance of power are a recipe for trouble. China and India are increasingly at odds over the security dilemma accompanying their rise: as each moves to protect its widening interests, the other sees it as a growing threat.

But the problem goes deeper than that. Both are "civilization-states" trying to "regain lost greatness" (p. 28) which inevitably brings them into confrontation. Part I of the book outlines their strategic cultures or belief systems and the ways in which they view each other. Whereas the dominant Indian approach is a mixed one that advocates both engagement and balancing, the Chinese perspective is shown as more hardline and focused on containing India. Part II spotlights a range of key areas — from the border to multilateral institutions — in which the two states have divergent interests. Their territorial dispute centred on the historical status of Tibet constitutes a central problem. Malik rejects China's historical claims over Tibet

and shows that, for much of its history, Tibet was either independent or autonomous. The border remains the chief potential site for a localized conflict that could cause China and India to “stumble into war” (p. 157). The argument supports the widespread perception that China’s external tensions — with not only India, but also several Southeast Asian states and the United States — have much to do with its lack of domestic legitimacy, which impels Beijing to lean on nationalism for regime support. Malik also highlights the role of Pakistan as the cornerstone of China’s efforts to contain India, to which end Beijing has supplied Islamabad with not only economic and conventional military aid, but nuclear technology and materials as well. The policy has the potential to rebound: China is already uncomfortable with Pakistan’s dubious links with various extremist groups behind much of the violence in the region. The withdrawal of a giant Chinese investment deal in the Thar coalfield in September 2011 is indicative of the seriousness of China’s concerns about the situation in Pakistan.

In Part III, Malik show us how China and India are wrestling over energy sources. A closely related sphere of rivalry is the high seas. As China expands its horizons in the Indian Ocean and India its presence in the South and East China Seas, “Beijing’s ‘Malacca paranoia’ is matched by New Delhi’s ‘Hormuz dilemma’” (p. 352). The final chapter of the book looks at the future in terms of structures. As China expands, Asian powers balance (India, Japan, Indonesia), bandwagon (North Korea, Pakistan, Bangladesh), or do both (South Korea and most Southeast Asian states). India, Malik notes, is the only major power never to have aligned with China — even the US and Japan did so during the 1970s. The fluid nature of the US-China-India triangle generates uncertainty, since there are elements of cooperation as well as conflict involving all the three bilateral relationships. The hope for stability lies in mutual accommodation.

Malik concludes by outlining five possible future scenarios for the China-India relationship (pp. 397–404): a Sino-Indian “Asian G2” involving cooperation on major issues, which would sideline the United States; a continuing mixture of economic cooperation and military-strategic competition; a Cold War-type intense competition; a hot war arising from one or the other of several flashpoints, such as China’s intervention in an India-Pakistan war or a Sino-Indian border clash; and Indian capitulation to “Big Brother China” as the gap between them widens. His own expectation is that the present trend of both cooperation and conflict will continue in the

near term, though he sees a Cold War looming large. Surprisingly, Malik does not consider the possibility that China will democratize, which would bring the expectation that China-India relations will eventually settle into a more stable equilibrium.

The book has significant strengths. It clearly and consistently enunciates a realist argument that focuses on balance of power and conflicts of interest over a range of issues, even if not all may agree with it. Malik's use of power transition theory, which shows political systems in the throes of change to be unstable, is effective. He draws attention to two simultaneous cases of conflict between an existing major power and a challenger — the contest between China and the United States, which occupies the world's attention, and that between China and India, which promises to be pivotal in the longer term. While the world tends to focus on US-China relations, the China-India relationship has a high potential for conflict. A somewhat deeper engagement with realist theory might have given the book stronger foundations. Malik tends to drift between "offensive realism", which views conflict as fundamentally intractable, and "defensive realism" which allows for stabilization through accommodation. The book starts out leaning towards the first approach and ends with an inclination towards the latter. Its grounding in history is valuable for the reader, for most shorter writings tend to lack this perspective. Malik is not a determinist: he looks at balances in terms of diverse possibilities, i.e. variations in common and conflicting interests and policies among various powers, notably with regard to the key US-China-India strategic triangle. Areas that could have been covered at greater length include the military relationship, especially with regard to the effects of nuclear weapons on Sino-Indian rivalry, and the implications of rising Sino-Indian trade and investment. That said, the volume is likely to become a standard reference and readers will particularly appreciate its consistency in power-centric analysis (despite the shift between offensive and defensive realism) and its clarity of thought and style.

RAJESH BASRUR is Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the South Asia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.