

***East of India, South of China: Sino-Indian Encounters in Southeast Asia.* By Amitav Acharya. Oxford and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017. Hardcover: 260pp.**

Southeast Asia is a “confluence zone” where personas of Indian and Chinese civilizations have met over several millennia through recurring and often coalescing waves. The India–China interface in Southeast Asia has long been a matter of scholarly debates, and particularly since India launched its “Look East” policy in 1992 (rechristened as the “Act East” policy in 2014). China’s “Good Neighbourly Policy” and its recently launched Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have brought China–Southeast Asia relations into sharper focus.

Although several recently published books have probed the interplay between India and China in Southeast Asia, almost all of them have focused on either New Delhi or Beijing’s perspective, or both. In this context, Amitav Acharya’s book is a remarkably fresh piece of scholarly work because it looks at the issue from Southeast Asia’s “own” perspective, thus aptly justifying the title *East of India, South of China*.

Moreover, instead of analysing the region as a mere theatre of rivalry, and Southeast Asia as a passive actor, Acharya considers Southeast Asia to be an active player which has vigorously shaped ties with both India and China, thus determining its own regional destiny. Instead of looking at India–China ties in binaries, Acharya explores India–Southeast Asia–China interplay to examine how their interactions have defined, and have the potential to redefine, Asia’s future (pp. 217–18). Most importantly, he uses a normative lens to examine the triangular relationship, which, so far, has been mainly examined through the lens of geopolitics.

Acharya covers a broad historical canvass, beginning with the post-World War II era until Manmohan Singh’s tenure as India’s prime minister. However, much of his focus is on Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s era, from 1947 to 1964. Acharya has used declassified documents from China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs from the 1950s and 1960s, which is another novelty of the book. Analysing the 1962 Sino–Indian War, Acharya argues that India not only lost territory to China, but also Southeast Asia’s respect as India was no longer considered a credible major power in the region. Furthermore, India’s own compulsions — such as its war with Pakistan in 1965, its role in Bangladesh’s liberation war in

1971, Cold War politics, and an inward looking economy — made it almost peripheral to Southeast Asia. Focusing on post-1962 developments, Acharya asks a fundamental question: Did India's loss result in China's gain in Southeast Asia? His answer: "To some extent it did—but with a qualification...while India suffered a loss of prestige...China did not necessarily win the diplomatic-political relations contest" (pp. xv–xvi).

Investigating the interactions between Nehru and Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai during the 1955 Bandung Conference, Acharya emphasizes, "evidence suggests that the Nehru-Zhou rivalry was somewhat exaggerated" (p. 120). Nonetheless, while Nehru succeeded in frustrating America's Cold War efforts in Southeast Asia (p. 61) (no new country joined the South-East Asia Treaty Organization after Bandung), his China efforts not only fell short of expectations but also damaged India in the long run: "Nehru was not able to use the Bandung Conference to bring about a long-term engagement of communist China, which was one of the key objectives of his foreign policy. Bandung thus proved to be a crucial stage for the encounters between India, China, and Southeast Asia and also for the evolution of the overall post-war regional and international order" (p. 60). Assessing the Bandung episode from an Asian regionalism perspective, Acharya argues that India and China both came out as "losers": "Nehru's perceived arrogance at the Conference might have reinforced existing concerns in Southeast Asia about Indian leadership (and hence domination)" while China's effort were "not sufficient for its neighbours to contemplate a regional grouping under Chinese leadership" (pp. 120–21).

Highlighting Nehru's role in constructing the Asian idea of regionalism, Acharya argues, "It was [Nehru] who articulated the earliest vision of a regional order that emphasised Asian unity, advancement of decolonisation and anti-racialism, and rejection of great-power intervention" (p. xiii). However, highlighting the contributions of the Philippines' José Rizal, Burma's Aung San and Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh, he observes, "It was in Southeast Asia that Asian regionalism took its most decisive shape" (p. 4).

Running through the meandering course of Asian history, Acharya opines that binary terms of "West" and "East" can no longer explain Asia's historical trajectory, and leads us to a point worth considering: "[over the decades] Asia has moved on, slowly bridging the gap between Kautilyan power politics, Confucian communitarianism, Nehruvian idealism, and Kantian liberalism. Hence the true basis for an Asian identity need not be a culturally

exceptionalist, politically backward, strategically competitive (West denouncing), and psychologically self-gratifying discourse of 'Asia rising', but the local construction and manifestation of enduring universal principles" (p. 25).

Acharya examines India's Look/Act East policy as a potential competitor to rising Chinese influence. Predicting India's future role in Asia, Acharya opines, "Ideas and norms are the places where India played a central role in building an Asian order. It may do so again in future" (p. xvii). Highlighting Southeast Asia's role, Acharya argues, "The perceived rivalry between India and China might have put off the smaller and weaker Asian nations to join either or both in forming any regional association. With the two largest Asian countries unacceptable as a regional leader, the space opened for the region's smaller and weaker countries to take the initiative in forming ASEAN — Asia's first viable regional association" (p. 121). He not only underscores the salience of Southeast Asia in the trilateral dynamics, but also proves that after Bandung, the 1962 Sino-Indian War and China's failed attempts to spread communism throughout Southeast Asia, India and China turned out as losers in the long-running Asian regionalism project.

Calling Chinese hegemony over Asia "impossible", Acharya rightly argues that a "more benign version of Chinese hegemony... akin to the old tributary system, may seem more likely, but is also implausible" (p. 220). He adds that the region is unlikely to come under the dominance of an Asian Great-Power concert either (p. 222). However, it should be noted that Southeast Asia and its regional manifestation, i.e. ASEAN, are neither cohesive nor homogenous. Its member countries are still dependent and influenced by one or more major powers to varying degrees, which makes them, and ASEAN, vulnerable, thus often leaving them in disarray in moments of strategic crisis. Acharya rightly concludes that Asia will neither be run by a hegemon, nor will it become "a region of unity" (p. 223). Asia will remain diverse, and building regional order will depend on both strong and weak states, which makes Southeast Asia's encounter with a rising China and India pivotal.

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