Rising China and Emergent India in the 21st Century: Friends or Rivals?

Surjit Mansingh

Abstract

This paper is written from the perspective of a historian who is aware of the 20th century roots of current problems between the two Asian giants, as well as their tremendous contributions to world civilization and Asian prosperity in the past, and hopefully in the future.

The paper analyzes issues troubling India-China relations, such as the unresolved boundary question, sensitivity on matters of international status, and mutual perceptions of threat arising from fears of encirclement. It shows how the two governments have made tremendous progress in overcoming or mitigating these problems, and in establishing strong human and economic ties between the two fastest growing economies in the world.

Pakistan continues to be a wild card with a negative impact on India-China as well as India-U.S. relations, but its capacity to create trouble may have been reduced by its own internal problems, as well as progress in the India-Pakistan composite peace process.

The United States remains the preponderant military and economic global power, despite recent damage to its moral influence, and all countries, including China and India, try to cultivate close relations with it.

Both India and China are engaged with Southeast Asia and with other Asian countries, and each has close and complex relations with the United States. The author sees a low risk of military conflict between India and China and a high desirability of international cooperation among all three in tackling the many facets of human security in the 21st century.
Introduction

The 21st century is already witnessing the rise of China and India to global prominence. There is a general expectation that these two countries will be among those that shape the geopolitics of the rest of the century.¹ But there are more questions raised than agreement on how, and in what directions, these two Asian giants will move themselves and the world around them—even if we assume that each continues for the next several decades along a trajectory based on present-day trends of high economic growth rates. Some of the most frequently asked questions are, for example: Are China and India friends or rivals? Are their bilateral relations cooperative or competitive? What are the risks of military conflict between them? How do they relate with their own and each other’s neighbors? And, how do the established powers of the international system, notably, the predominant global power of the present day, the United States of America, deal with each of them?

Varying answers to the above questions are to be expected, because international relationships usually are dynamic, responding to both internal and external factors, because what are called “rising China” and “emergent India” are relatively recent phenomena that might disturb existing economic and political power structures, and because commentators may view events from different perspectives, of which the hard neo-realist or national security stance is but one. Generally speaking, analysts adopting that stance postulate rivalry between India and China and are pessimistic about prospects of Asian or international cooperation.² Using a historical viewpoint, we take the position that India and China have strengthened their bilateral relations very considerably since 1988 through regular, high-level meetings, confidence-

¹ The U.S. National Intelligence Council reported in 2004 on “the likely emergence of China and India as new major global players . . . (that) will transform the geopolitical landscape.” Mapping the Global Future: Report of the National Intelligence Council’s 2020 Project, Washington, DC, 2004.