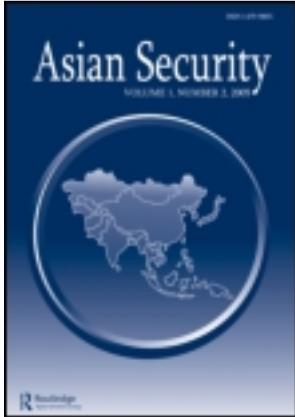


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### Clash of the Titans?

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## REVIEW ESSAY

# Clash of the Titans?

DAVID J. KARL

Mohan Malik. *China and India: Great Power Rivals* (Boulder, CO: FirstForumPress, 2011), 468 pages, hardcover, \$79.95.

Jonathan Holslag. *China and India: Prospects for Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 234 pages, hardcover, \$37.50.

Ashley J. Tellis, Travis Tanner, and Jessica Keough, ed. *Asia Responds to Its Rising Powers: China and India* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2011), 380 pages, paperback, \$34.95.

**Abstract:** *Asia's strategic evolutions during the next two decades or so will put major theories about great-power behavior to the test. A trio of new books about the Sino-Indian rivalry help sketch out a timely research agenda.*

In the minds of grand strategists, policy pundits, and business analysts, China and India are now firmly conjoined as Asia's twin colossi, whose spectacular, simultaneous economic rise is propelling an epochal and inexorable realignment in the structure of world power. *Global Trends 2025*, a recent study issued by the US National Intelligence Council, argues that the impact of these "rising heavyweights" will help ensure that "the international system – as constructed following the Second World War – will be almost unrecognizable by 2025." A widely read journalist opines that "the march of power from west to east has become the central, unnerving fact of geopolitical life," while another avers that "we are seeing at least the beginning of the end not just of an illusory 'unipolar moment' for the U.S. but of western supremacy, in general, and of Anglo-American power, in particular."<sup>1</sup> Both countries are the prime drivers in the "Rise of the Rest" saga that posits a "post-American" world and are the main protagonists in the ubiquitously cited "BRICs" epic propagated by Goldman Sachs.<sup>2</sup> Even President Barack Obama has joined the chorus and regularly points to China's and India's swift climb as a means of exhorting domestic reform in the United States, while Catherine Ashton, the European Union's foreign policy chief, repeatedly frets that their ascendance will push Europe to the margins of world affairs.

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The shifting balance of global power has set the stage for several momentous geopolitical dramas to play out in the next decades. One storyline concerns the evolving relationship between an increasingly powerful and ambitious China and the United States, whose relative global standing is widely seen as diminishing. A second involves the future direction of relations between China and India, continental-sized states that together account for more than a third of humanity and, in coming years, an even greater fraction of world economic output.<sup>3</sup> A third, which has not been well explored in the scholarly literature, entails the triangular interplay between the first two narratives.

Like the US–China equation, China–India interactions uneasily combine the competitive dynamics of power politics with the cooperative impulses of growing economic engagement.<sup>4</sup> Leaders in Beijing and New Delhi make a point of touting their potential for joining economic forces while downplaying notions of incipient strategic rivalry. Others, in contrast, believe that the countries are already embarked on a struggle for economic leadership of the dawning Asian Century – what *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof calls “the great race of the 21st century” and what *The Economist* dubs the “Contest of the Century.”<sup>5</sup> Still others foresee increasing military frictions and even outright conflict. One prominent Indian commentator, for example, forecasts that China, desperate to ensure its supremacy in Asia, will soon go to war with India, while another warns that “it may not be long before China takes its gloves off.”<sup>6</sup> In December 2011, a former Indian defense minister stood in Parliament to warn that an attack by China was imminent.<sup>7</sup> Bellicose rhetoric also has been growing in Beijing about the necessity of “teaching India a lesson.” Arguing that “[t]here cannot be two suns in the sky,” one analyst connected with the Chinese Defense Ministry has called upon his government to precipitate the collapse of the Indian federal state by supporting various separatist movements.<sup>8</sup>

The dichotomous nature of the bilateral relationship has been on full display in recent months. In the summer of 2011, the Chinese navy reportedly challenged the passage of an Indian amphibious warfare ship in the South China Sea, an energy-rich area that is assertively claimed in almost its entirety by Beijing. Thereafter, in defiance of China’s explicit warnings, New Delhi announced that an Indian state-owned energy company would proceed with hydrocarbon exploration off the coast of Vietnam. With nationalistic tribunes in Beijing calling the move “a serious political provocation,” China quickly put out the word that it would expand its own seabed explorations in the Indian Ocean. New Delhi also moved to solidify security relations with Hanoi, including the possible provision of military assistance, and to strengthen its influence in Myanmar, which China and India have long regarded as an arena for geopolitical jousting.<sup>9</sup> The accelerating military competition between China and India along their contested Himalayan border was also in evidence, with the Indian defense minister declaring that Beijing was “aggressively” building up its forces along the 4,000 kilometer-long frontier and the army chief of staff claiming that thousands of Chinese personnel, including combat engineers from the People’s Liberation Army, were stationed in the Gilgit-Baltistan region, which is controlled by Pakistan but considered by New Delhi to be an integral part of Kashmir. The Defense Ministry in New Delhi also publicized a plan to create four new divisions along the border,

including two that would form a mountain strike corps geared toward offensive operations, and to deploy supersonic BrahMos cruise missiles in the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh (which China claims is actually “South Tibet”), the first deployment of offensive tactical missiles against China.

Yet even as frictions over the South China Sea heated up, high-level delegations from both governments were sitting down in Beijing for the inaugural session of their newly established strategic economic dialogue. In 2010, China became India’s largest trading partner, with two-way trade amounting to some \$60 billion, and the conferees reiterated plans to elevate trade flows to the \$100-billion mark by 2015. Indeed, according to some estimates, Beijing and New Delhi could well form the world’s largest trading combination by 2030.<sup>10</sup> The Indian Central Bank also announced that Indian companies would be permitted to borrow up to \$1 billion in Chinese yuan, a move that opens the gate for India’s beleaguered power sector to import much-needed plant equipment from its Northern neighbor.<sup>11</sup>

The three volumes under review here survey the cross-currents buffeting the China–India relationship in different ways and reach contrary appraisals of the future. Mohan Malik’s *China and India: Great Power Rivals* is an expansive, deeply researched examination of the competition’s contours, ranging from the traditional flashpoints of Tibet and Pakistan to newer antagonisms involving maritime influence and access to natural resources.<sup>12</sup> Disparaging as “wishful thinking” the view that growing economic linkages will mitigate security tensions, he contends that the potential for conflict is greater than generally recognized.

*China and India: Prospects for Peace* by Jonathan Holslag is a concise, theoretically informed analysis of the factors shaping bilateral relations. In contrast to Malik’s focus on geopolitical dynamics, his attention is on the relationship’s economic dimensions. Yet he arrives at a similar place as Malik, finding that expanding commercial ties will actually sharpen the prospects for rivalry, rather than propitiate them as some suggest.

*Asia Responds to Its Rising Powers* is the latest contribution in the annual Strategic Asia assessments offered by the National Bureau of Asian Research. Chapters by M. Taylor Fravel and Harsh V. Pant, in particular, provide contrasting judgments on the likelihood of heightened security competition between China and India, and the introductory chapter by Ashley J. Tellis furnishes a keen exploration of how their combined rise challenges US policy.

### Appraising the Future

Sino–Indian relations have blown hot and cold during the past 15 years. In 1998, the Indian defense minister referred to China as “enemy number one,” and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who led a Hindu-nationalist government, justified India’s abrupt series of nuclear weapon tests by pointing to the strategic challenge emanating from the North.<sup>13</sup> Yet a few years later, Vajpayee was in Beijing declaring that his neighbor was not a threat, acknowledging Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, and pledging to constrain the activities of the Tibetan government in exile that operates out of Dharamsala in Northern India. This rapprochement continued under his successor, Manmohan Singh, who currently heads a Congress Party-led government that took

office in mid-2004. When Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao paid a visit to New Delhi in April 2005, the two countries established a “Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity” and reached agreement on guiding principles for resolving their long-running territorial disputes. Singh told his guest, “Together India and China could reshape the world order,” while Wen proclaimed, “Cooperation is just like two padogas – one hardware, one software . . . Combined, we can take the leadership position in the world.” The air was redolent with talk of economic collaborations, and the neologism of “Chindia” gained currency.<sup>14</sup> Speaking at the World Economic Forum gathering, the Indian commerce minister declared that the two countries were the “twin engines of growth” in Asia and that “I do not see this as an ‘India versus China’ debate, but rather in an ‘India with China’ context.”<sup>15</sup>

Yet by 2006 a new pall of antagonism was creeping into the relationship as Beijing vocally reasserted its claims in the Eastern sector of the border. Some analysts attribute the harder line as a reaction to the wide-ranging defense agreement that India signed with the United States in June 2005 as well as the US–India civilian nuclear accord that was announced in principle a month later.<sup>16</sup> Malik and Pant, however, place emphasis on the recrudescence of the Tibet issue as the ethnic Tibetan population inside China became more restive. Beijing’s annexation of the region in 1950–51 brought the Chinese and Indian states into direct territorial contact for the first time in history. China’s subsequent rejection of the McMahon Line, the colonial-era demarcation of the Indo–Tibetan frontier, all but guaranteed territorial discord, leading to the outbreak of the 1962 border war – a disastrous affair for Indians that continues to color their approach to China – as well as serious military crises in 1967 and 1987. Further complicating matters are the activities in India of the Dalai Lama, the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader whom Beijing regards as a separatist, as well as the location of Tawang Monastery just inside the Indian side of the contested border. Beijing is keen to exert control over the monastery, a revered site in Tibetan Buddhism that many believe will play a critical role in the selection of the next Dalai Lama.<sup>17</sup> The Tibetan border, in short, is the venue where the Sino–Indian security dilemma plays out most intensely, and Malik characterizes it as the “single issue [that] has the potential to rock and unravel the entire relationship” (p. 144).<sup>18</sup>

The Chinese military buildup in the vast Tibetan region has elicited much alarm in New Delhi in recent years. Malik fears that another major crisis is brewing, because “China’s positioning of large military forces on the Tibetan plateau is aimed at both suppressing popular unrest and ‘teaching India a lesson’ should New Delhi cross certain red lines” and “Beijing’s game plan [is] to bring the entire Buddhist Himalayan belt within its orbit” (pp. 143, 144). Pant likewise interprets aggressive Chinese patrolling of the border area as an effort, via “repeated though controlled provocations,” to probe “how far it can push India” (p. 117). In their view, these territorial ructions, combined with the accumulation of other irritants, make for a combustible mix. Malik contends that India in the time ahead “will find itself engaged in an intense economic and security competition with China with considerable potential for conflict” (p. 3), while Pant believes that “Sino–Indian ties have entered turbulent times” as “a troubled history, coupled with the structural uncertainties engendered by their simultaneous rise, is

propelling the two Asian giants on a trajectory that they might find difficult to navigate in the coming years” (p. 128).

Fravel has a much more sanguine view of the future, however. He maintains that, while Indians tend to regard China as an ever-present danger, the reverse is not true. In his judgment, Beijing continues to see the United States as its principal strategic competitor and has a generally positive assessment of India’s rise, because it is perceived as further diluting US global power as well as facilitating China’s own growth. Nor is the security dilemma, according to Fravel, as acute as Malik and Pant make it out. As he sees it, Beijing is too focused on Taiwan contingencies for India’s expansive plans for military modernization to have had more than a limited impact on China’s own military strategy and force posture. He also dismisses the steady reports in the Indian media that China has deployed nuclear forces in Tibet and argues that the security buildup underway in the area (including the noteworthy buildup of rail and road infrastructure that is much commented on by the Indian press) is directed more at quelling local discontent than with holding India under active threat. All in all, Fravel avers, the “common interests that China and India share as rising developing states are likely to dampen the potential for security competition between them so long as these interests endure” (p. 67).

But for how long is that? Much of Holslag’s book is focused on whether the shared economic interests Fravel emphasizes will continue to take the edge off of growing security complications. He is rather pessimistic that they will. The dramatic expansion in bilateral commercial flows during the last decade has caused a misleading impression, he points out, because the Chinese and Indian economies are really not all that synergistic. Trade levels are still modest compared with each country’s overall engagement with the global economy and current trade patterns – raw materials make up the vast bulk of India’s exports, whereas China’s exports are mainly finished products – markedly favor Beijing more than New Delhi.<sup>19</sup> Nor, in his perspective, does the future look any better. Continued economic growth in both countries has already fueled a sharp competition for natural resources and consumer markets in third countries.<sup>20</sup> And then there is the effect of what Holslag terms “Ricardo’s reality” – as India becomes more of a global manufacturing hub and China strengthens its technology and service sectors, each country’s respective comparative advantage will increasingly collide.<sup>21</sup> Taking aim at the arguments put forth by Fravel, Holslag counters that as these developments take hold, “China will gradually come to take India more seriously as a challenger and also consequently modify its policies” (p. 171). In sum, Holslag concludes that conflicting “economic ambitions will now assume the fore as key determinants of the intensity and character” of the bilateral rivalry (p. 170).<sup>22</sup>

### Triangular Dynamics

The strategic role that the United States chooses to play on the changing Asian landscape will be a significant determinant of whether the relationship between Beijing and New Delhi gravitates towards cooperation or competition. Much of Washington’s policy toward New Delhi during the past decade is predicated on the belief that

the China–India rivalry will inevitably deepen in the coming years as both countries expand in power and aspiration, causing India in turn to move into ever-closer strategic collaboration with the United States. From this premise, US policymakers reason that it is in America’s geopolitical interest to bolster the development of India’s power resources.<sup>23</sup> Although US and Indian officials are quick to deny that their quickening relationship has an anti-China motive, a former Bush administration official sums up US thinking this way: “China is a central element in our effort to encourage India’s emergence as a world power. But we don’t need to talk about the containment of China. It will take care of itself as India rises.”<sup>24</sup>

Will the future pattern of great power politics in Asia resemble American calculations and will India’s great power credentials live up to US expectations? On the first score, Malik is skeptical, though he notes there are compelling reasons for New Delhi to maintain close relations with Washington, as the United States is likely to remain India’s leading source of much-needed capital, investment, and technology. And given the rather large power differential vis-à-vis China, India on its own is incapable of establishing a satisfactory geopolitical equilibrium. Yet in the end, India’s deep-seated sense of its own destiny, combined with a traditional desire to maintain strategic independence, will inhibit the development of a formal alignment with the United States. Malik thus expects relations among the three powers to remain fluid, shifting regularly in response to changing bilateral and multilateral variables. Decisive among these, he believes, is the attitude Beijing ultimately assumes toward New Delhi’s core security interests, though he notes that the “past record of China’s India policy does not give much cause for optimism” (p. 405). And while some counsel that New Delhi, in view of its power deficits, would be better off accommodating Beijing’s own concerns, Malik insists that “it is inconceivable that India would accept Chinese leadership of the Asian continent without first balancing it by alignment with like-minded “China-wary countries” (p. 406).

Pant likewise agrees that China’s rapid ascent will ineluctably bring India and the United States even closer together, though India will remain wary of an explicit alliance framework. Still, he expects New Delhi to continue looking to Washington for critical support in managing the Sino–Indian dynamic, and he expects the United States to increasingly regard India as an indispensable pillar in the evolving balance of power in Asia.

But will Washington continue to see New Delhi in this light? The United States might, for example, conclude that its best strategic option in an Asia dominated by two feuding giants is to play the role of a swing state, preserving its regional equities by adroitly maneuvering between China and India. Alternatively, Washington might decide to cast its security and economic lot with Beijing, a prospect that has caused recent trepidation in New Delhi given the dramatic incongruence between the Bush administration’s ardent courting of New Delhi followed swiftly by the Obama administration’s brief flirtation with the notion of a G-2 partnership with Beijing.<sup>25</sup> This specter has subsided during the last two years as US–China tensions have flared anew and Washington redirects its focus to bolstering strategic ties with New Delhi. But it could well reemerge in the future, especially if India’s socioeconomic development

continues to lag behind China's and elites in New Delhi cannot overcome their inhibitions about a closer affiliation with Washington.<sup>26</sup> Tellis raises this possibility by noting that Washington's efforts to develop a durable security partnership with New Delhi are "constantly challenged by the reality that the United States is locked into a relationship of tight interdependence with its potential chief rival, China, while enjoying weaker economic links with its potential key ally, India." Over time, he observes, the United States may become "hard-pressed to justify preferential involvement with India at a time when U.S. relations with China – however problematic they might be on many counts – are turning out to be deeper, more encompassing, and, at least where the production of wealth is concerned, more fruitful" (pp. 19, 20).

A similar outcome could come about if the United States concludes that the large investments it is making in India's strategic future are not matching the return. The power asymmetries between Beijing and New Delhi remain quite stark. However dramatic the expansion of the Indian economy during the past two decades, it has been overshadowed by the explosive growth rates China has posted in the same period.<sup>27</sup> Also evident are the large disparities in military capabilities. For all of its newfound affluence and rapidly expanding defense budgets, India remains puzzlingly unable to alter to its favor the military balance vis-à-vis its primary rivals, Pakistan and China. According to one new assessment, severe dysfunctions in New Delhi's national security machinery keep India from being "a traditional great power with clear strategic objectives and the military means to achieve them."<sup>28</sup> Despite the much-ballyhooed "Cold Start" military doctrine – which emphasizes the threat of large-scale but calibrated punitive actions to deter Pakistani adventurism – Indian military leaders reportedly told the government in the days following the November 2008 terrorist strikes in Mumbai that the army was utterly ill prepared to go to war.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, a 2009 assessment prepared by the army concludes that it will take some two decades for the army to gain full combat preparedness, while the air force chief has stated that half of his equipment is either obsolete or obsolescent.<sup>30</sup> The chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee recently admitted that the country neither has the "capability nor the intention" to match China's overall military strength. "These are indeed sobering thoughts," he added, "and therefore our strategy to deal with China would need to be in consonance with these realities."<sup>31</sup> One could imagine that if these realities do indeed continue into the future, security managers in Washington might be tempted to realign their own China strategy as well.

## Conclusion

Asia's strategic evolutions during the next two decades or so will put major theories of international relations to the test. Will the power transition dynamics occasioned by relative US decline, coupled with the ascent of China and India, unleash an irresistible maelstrom of security competition and conflict? Can the emergence of regional multipolarity produce durable stability and peace among the major stakeholders? Or will great-power politics lead Washington and New Delhi to band together to counter Beijing's rise? Will economics serve as an emollient or a bur on points of geopolitical stress? And what role will shared democratic attributes play in defining US

and Indian strategies toward each other and vis-à-vis authoritarian China? The three works reviewed in this essay help to sketch out a timely research agenda as we begin the search for answers.

## NOTES

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2. Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008); and Dominic Wilson and Roopa Purushothaman, "Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050," *Global Economics Paper* No. 99 (October 1, 2003).
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  27. A new appraisal of their respective power trajectories is contained in Charles Wolf, Jr., et al, *China and India, 2025: A Comparative Assessment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011). For an argument that the material basis of Indian power is not as secure as some believe, see David J. Karl, "Three Events Tell a Tale of Two Indias," in *PacNet #67* (Honolulu: Pacific Forum CSIS, December 28, 2008).
  28. Stephen P. Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, *Arming without Aiming: India's Military Modernization* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), p. 1.
  29. On the military strategy, consult Walter C. Ladwig III, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine," *International Security* Vol. 32, No. 3 (Winter 2007–08), pp. 158–190. On the military deficiencies in the 2008 crisis, see Siddharth Srivastava, "Indian Army 'Backed out' of Pakistan Attack," *Asia Times*, January 21, 2009; and "India's Obsolete Defense," *Asia Sentinel*, November 1, 2010. In a February 2010 cable to Washington, Timothy Roemer, the US ambassador in New Delhi, assessed that the Cold Start strategy "may never be put to use on a battlefield because of substantial and serious resource constraints." See "US Embassy Cables: India 'Unlikely' to Deploy Cold Start against Pakistan," *The Guardian*, December 1, 2010.
  30. "50% of IAF Equipment Obsolete, Says IAF Chief," *Times of India*, October 5, 2010. On India's lack of military preparedness along the Himalayan frontier, see Sandeep Unnithan, "Not Ready for War," *India Today*, November 7, 2011.
  31. "Don't Have Capability or Intention to Match China Force for Force: Navy Chief," *Indian Express*, August 11, 2009.

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