

China-India Brief

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Guest Column

Interconnected Asian History as a Mirror for the Emerging Regional Order

By Manjeet S. Pardesi

China and India have been seen as rising powers since the beginning of the twenty-first century. As early as 2012, the US National Intelligence Council (NIC) **believed** that “China’s and India’s current economic rises...[will] dwarf all the previous ones of Britain (19th century) and the US and Japan (20th century).” In fact, the NIC report even argued that the rise of Asia and the diffusion of power from the West had the potential of “reversing the historic rise of the West since 1750,” because “[p]reviously, only one or two countries have been rising at a time, shaking

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The *China-India Brief* is a monthly digest focusing on the relationship between Asia’s two biggest powers. The Brief provides readers with a key summary of current news articles, reports, analyses, commentaries, and journal articles published in English on the China-India relationship. It features a Guest Column weighing in on key current issues in China-India relations.

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the international system rather than reordering it wholesale in a compressed timeframe.” Although several factors such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, China’s demographic challenges, US-China economic decoupling/derisking, and India’s slow ascent among others have tempered assessments of the speed of Asia’s rise, its consequences are nevertheless believed to be dramatic and deeply worrisome. There are two potential futures that dominate the policy and scholarly discourses.

The first view is based on a peculiar reading of Western history and is captured by the Harvard scholar Graham Allison’s idea of the **Thucydides’ Trap**. According to this perspective, the probability of an order-defining war increases “when a rising power rivals a ruling power.” Invoking the veritable ancient Greek historian Thucydides, this view draws from the presumed causes of the conflict between a “ruling” Sparta and a “rising” Athens some 2,500 years ago, and otherwise uses examples from (mostly) European history after 1500. Consequently, the rise of China is viewed with trepidation for it may lead to a conflict with the United States as the “ruling power” of the current international order. The idea of the Thucydides’ Trap has parallels with the power transition theory paradigm of International Relations theory that sees a high probability of conflict between any two states at the apex of the international system. Notably, power transition theorists **foresee** a looming transition between China and India after the impending one between the United States

and China. They **predict** that “once Asian nations modernize and overtake the United States, no new transitions are anticipated. If the current roster of nations remains in place, it appears China and eventually India will become future dominant nations.” So dramatic is this prognosis that it has even been **interpreted** as “a variant of the ‘end of history’ hypothesis” because “there will be no further power transitions, since there is unlikely to be another country that can match the population resources of China and India.”

The second view is based on a simplistic reading of Chinese history. This perspective draws from another Harvard scholar, the late **John Fairbank**, according to whom imperial China as *zhongguo* (“the Middle Kingdom”) sat at the center of Asia (and even the world) at the apex of a pecking order in a hierarchical system before the rise of the West in more recent centuries. Given the millennia-long legacy of this so-called “tribute system,” contemporary China is believed to have “inherited a set of institutionalized attitudes and historical precedents not easily conformable to the European tradition of international relations among equally sovereign nation states.” According to **Jim Mattis**, the former US Secretary of Defence, “The Ming Dynasty appears to be their [contemporary China’s] model, albeit in a more muscular manner, demanding that other nations become tribute states kowtowing to Beijing.” Not to be outdone, contemporary China is also instrumentalising Ming history for contemporary geopolitics.



More specifically, the famed maritime expeditions of the Ming admiral **Zheng He** (1405–1433) are being portrayed by Beijing as a reflection of China’s peacefulness and openness during that period, and in explicit contrast to European maritime expeditions from the late fifteenth century onwards that are associated with violence and colonialism.

However, both dominant views are flawed. The Thucydides’ Trap and power transition perspective is Eurocentric. Not only are none of the cases drawn from any serious analysis of Asia’s past, but also this approach offers a dyadic perspective on great power rivalries and ignores the role of agency in the strategic choices of the states in such relationships. Furthermore, as argued by **Steve Chan**, “they dismiss an actual historical case of transition—the one involving the peaceful overtaking of Britain by the United States [at the apex of the global economy]—from their analysis,” and because “there have been quite a few

instances of peaceful power transitions among major-power dyads.” Finally, such analyses work with relatively simplistic measures of power, the central variable, and it remains unclear if and when China will surpass the United States. As argued by **Barry Buzan and George Lawson**, “it is not going to be ‘China’s turn’ next.” In other words, China has attenuated American dominance. However, the United States continues to remain powerful, and therefore, a non-hegemonic order is in the making with the rise of the others, including India and the rest of Asia.

Similarly, the second view that draws upon China’s past is Sinocentric. As argued by **James Millward**, it takes the Sinocentric *worldview* of China’s centrality as “a factual description” of the pre-European *world order* in Asia. In practice, the early Ming expressed **political equality** with the Timurids of Central Asia, and Ayşe Zarakol has even referred to this period as a **bipolar** order as opposed to a Sinocentric world.

Equally, the Ming's so-called tributaries such as the port-polity of **Melaka** also partook in the Perso-Islamicate world, and therefore, Melaka did not live in a Sinocentric world. In other words, the early Ming's world was a non-hegemonic system even as China was the single-largest polity then. In fact, **Amitav Acharya** has even argued that the so-called Silk Road and Buddhism (from India) had "introduced to China the idea of a world with multiple centers" since the early centuries of the Common Era.

Consequently, the non-hegemonic order that was one of the main characteristics of Asia's pre-European past may be the best mirror as we think through the contours of the emerging regional order that will also very likely be non-hegemonic as explained above. Since the beginning of the Common Era, China and India were the world's most productive economic regions until as late as 1800. This "**Sino-Indian Great Divergence**" led to "the one-way flow of bullion from West Eurasia to China and India." However, straddling between China and India, Southeast Asia was not a periphery of any presumed Sinic or Indic centers. In fact, Southeast Asia was pivotal. Although the so-called Silk Road was a **Cotton Road** in the reverse direction, it was Southeast Asian traders and shipmasters who connected China and India **along the maritime routes** using ships built in Southeast Asia that sailed using Southeast Asian techniques. In other words, a **de-centered order** existed in pre-European maritime Asia in terms of trade. This was also true in terms of the

region's ideational underpinnings that were informed not just by Sinic ideas but also by Indic and Islamicate ideas.

China's and India's current economic rise is likely to recreate such a de-centered yet interconnected and non-hegemonic system in terms of its material and ideational moorings. As early as 2005, Singapore's **Goh Chok Tong** was "reconceptualizing East Asia" by emphasising interconnections because the rise of the Asian giants meant that "[i]t will be increasingly less tenable to regard South Asia and East Asia as distinct strategic theatres interacting only at the margins." At the same time, Southeast Asian states also desire the United States' continued engagement with the region. In other words, they are seeking the co-engagement of all the major powers while rejecting the hegemony of any single one of them. As argued by **Evelyn Goh**, Southeast Asians "understand the international order to be asymmetrical, uneven, and multi-pillared, involving more actors, factors, and vectors than the concept of polarity can capture" even as the great powers will continue to be important. Consequently, the emerging order in Asia is being actively shaped by the regional actors instead of being a function of the preferences of the great powers alone. A thicker and more legitimate order with multiple stakeholders is in the making in Asia. Although challenges remain, an all-out system-destroying war is not in the offing. **Asia's interconnected past** before the rise of the West that endured for centuries in the absence of a hegemon can provide novel

academic and policy insights as we navigate our post-hegemonic future.

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