

China-India Brief

A publication of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation



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

 Lee Kuan Yew
School of Public Policy

 CENTRE ON ASIA
AND GLOBALISATION

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.

Centre on Asia and Globalisation

cag@nus.edu.sg

469A Bukit Timah Road, Tower Block 10,

Singapore 259770

<https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/cag>

cont'd p2

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.

Manjeet S. Pardesi, PhD, is Associate Professor of International Relations at Victoria University of Wellington. His forthcoming book, *Divergent Worlds: What the Ancient Mediterranean and Indian Ocean Can Tell Us About the Future of International Order* (co-authored with Amitav Acharya) will be published by Yale University Press later this year. He posts on X (formerly twitter) at [@manjeetsp](#) and can be reached at manjeet.pardesi@vuw.ac.nz.

Who needs a leader? Europe, China, India and the Global South

By Susanne Kamerling

For Europe, Russia's war in Ukraine has shone a spotlight on the Global South as a **major geopolitical factor**. After the invasion on February 24, 2022, the United States (US) and Europe have attempted to mobilise the world in condemning Russia's actions, taking measures and adopting sanctions against Moscow. Forty countries supported sanctions, but two-thirds of the global population lives in countries that are either **neutral vis-à-vis Russia or Russia-leaning**. So while Western support for Ukraine intensified, many countries in the Global South have not endorsed Western interpretations and narratives about the war and its implications. For many in the West, this has come as a surprise. There was also little understanding in Europe of China's support for the Kremlin, but even less so of India's lack of condemnation of Russia and its strong historic ties with the country. Was India not Europe's like-minded democratic counterpart in Asia?

Europe is thus late in waking up to the geopolitical importance of the Global South, the reality of the strong ties that China and India have with Russia, and the many initiatives that both countries have unfolded



Image Credit: Flickr/European Council President

vis-à-vis the Global South. And Europe's positioning is often still problematic. As Indian Minister of External Affairs Jaishankar **stated** just months after the war started in Ukraine, "Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems...A new agenda must come; the world cannot be that Eurocentric as it used to be in the past." As the 'Global South' construct has its roots in the non-alignment movements and Cold War postcolonial solidarity, **Siba Grovogui** coins the term as "a symbolic designation with political implications meant to capture a cohesion that emerged when former colonial entities engaged in political projects of decolonization and moved towards a realization of a postcolonial order." The Global South is now impatiently waiting and actively demanding the completion of this order.

But Europe is not the only one that has rediscovered the centrality of the Global South for political support. India, as a rising power of the Global South itself, has also increasingly targeted the current dynamism and agency in the Global South for its own leadership ambitions and global stakeholder initiatives. Its chairmanship of the G20 in 2023 was the perfect platform for this. At the G20 meetings, prime minister Narendra Modi **claimed** India is “becoming the voice of the Global South.” During India’s presidency, New Delhi laid out a **series of initiatives** that have positioned India as a strong advocate and voice for the interests of the Global South: the admission of the African Union (AU) to the G20, the announcement of the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC), the plan to reform multilateral development banks and expand their lending capacity, and hosting the virtual **‘Voice of the Global South Summit’** which enabled 125 developing countries to share their ideas and expectations from the G20.

But there are competitors for this leadership role of the Global South around the corner. For the first time, Xi Jinping outspokenly put China in the Global South camp—something which he has long refused to do—at the 2023 BRICS summit in Johannesburg when he **said** that, “China will always be a member of the family of developing countries and the Global South.” Xi needs the Global South in his conceptualisation of the *Pax Sinica* (or *Tianxia*) he is striving for, which, in his eyes, is a much better alternative to the current

liberal international order benefiting the US and other Western countries. China under Xi has since unfolded **three global initiatives** to forge ‘the common destiny of humankind’: the 2021 Global Development Initiative, the 2022 Global Security Initiative and the 2023 Global Civilisation Initiative. All three are designed to appeal particularly to the Global South. Of course, all of them are enforced by the much older Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that helps the many countries in the Global South in building much-needed infrastructure. For Xi, the Global South is critical in Beijing’s global leadership ambitions and in getting political support for transforming the international order into a **Sino-centric one** in which China and its partners set the rules. This is how ‘democratisation of the international order’ Chinese-style will look. According to **Steve Tsang**, to support that ambition, “it makes sense for China to engage with the Global South, (which is) much more numerous than Western democracies and mostly authoritarian in governance structure.” In the meantime, China has also led a push to expand the BRICS, extending invitations to Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to join. But while both India and China—next to countries like Brazil and South Africa—claim to speak on behalf of the Global South and attempt to assume a leadership role, the question is whether that is what countries in the Global South want. Leaders in Europe and the US tend to frame the twenty-first century as a rivalry between competing ideological and political systems and

continue to strive for support for the international liberal order and those who challenge that rules-based order. The Global South itself has thus become a battleground for political support from many sides. According to an **opinion poll** by the European Council on Foreign Relations conducted across twenty-one countries however, this way of thinking in rivalries and drawing countries in the Global South into one's camp is not the way many people in the Global South want to look at the world. Countries in the Global South do not want to be forced to choose sides in the ongoing rivalries between Russia and Europe and the US, or the US and China for that matter. Although in the outcomes of this poll, Europe and the US are seen as more attractive and as having more appealing values than China or Russia, the appeal does not translate to political support. For most people in most countries, including in the Global South and Europe itself, the world has become an *à la carte* world where you can mix and match your partners depending on the specific issue instead of signing up for a fixed set of arrangements and loyalties with fixed partners. Countries in the Global South strive to strengthen their own agency and represent their own interests. They are also concerned that they will be pushed into the role of the **"South of the Global South."** Although sometimes in need of external support, they tend to be faced with condescending positioning from former

European colonisers on the one hand and from non-Western states that are better off—like China and India—on the other hand. In short, it seems that countries in the Global South are not looking at all for any leader to speak on their behalf.

Susanne Kamerling, MSc, is Associate Fellow at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs of the University of Leiden, the Netherlands and The SPEAR Institute, Germany. She posts on X (formerly Twitter) at [@s_kamerling](#).

News Reports

Bilateral relations

China's Most Advanced Stealth Fighters Deployed 150 Km From Sikkim

NDTV, May 30

Shigatse, where the Chinese J-20 has been spotted, lies less than 290 km from Hasimara in West Bengal, where India bases its second squadron of 16 Rafales.

New China envoy finally arrives in India, but defrosting ties will be tricky

The Straits Times, May 21

The arrival of the new Chinese ambassador to India, Mr Xu Feihong, is being seen as a first step by Beijing towards improving ties marred by border troubles.

China ready to work with India to find mutually acceptable solutions to 'specific issues': Beijing's new envoy

The Times of India, May 11

China is ready to work with India to "accommodate" each other's concerns and find a mutually acceptable solution to "specific issues", Xu Feihong has said.

China builds road through Shaksgam Valley, India registers protest

The Print, May 2

China is building a road in Shaksgam Valley that can connect Muzaffarabad through the Mustagh Pass to Yarkahnd in Xinjiang.

China and India in the Region

South China Sea: India sends warships as 'subtle reminder' to Beijing

South China Morning Post, May 20

The INS Kiltan then sailed on to Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay, arriving on May 12 for exchanges and a joint maritime exercise with the Vietnamese navy.

India on alert as China-Bangladesh military cooperation raises strategic concerns

India Today, May 11

Dhaka has gradually leaned towards Beijing and acquired fighter jets, tanks and submarines, marking a shift in the geopolitical landscape.

India completes troop exit from Maldives at pro-China leader's request

The Straits Times, May 9

India has replaced some 80 soldiers on the Maldives with civilians after a demand by President Mohamed Muizzu who has pivoted the archipelago's ties towards China.

Philippines first, India later, as U.S. prioritizes 'Squad' allies

Nikkei Asia, May 8

An emerging quadrilateral group, between the US, Japan, Australia and the Philippines, has become the core of Washington's foreign security policy in the Indo-Pacific, quickly overtaking the Quad in priority, analysts say.

Trade and Economy

Chinese companies may be permitted to dilute stakes in JVs with Indian partners

The Economic Times, May 31

While decisions will continue to be made on a "case-by-case" basis with a focus on security concerns, sources suggest that this move could enable companies like Xiaomi and other prominent Chinese firms to expand their presence in India.

India major gainer of China+1, exports to soar to \$835 billion by 2030: Nomura

The Economic Times, May 28

India's exports are projected to skyrocket to \$835 billion by 2030 from \$431 billion in 2023, driven by its vast domestic market attracting companies seeking supply chain diversification away from China.

Yellen says India and China hindering 'Pillar 1' tax deal

Reuters, May 25

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said she is trying to save a part of the global corporate tax deal focused on highly profitable multinational firms, but India is refusing to engage on issues important to US interests.

China surpasses US, becomes India's top trading partner with \$118.4 billion business

Livemint, May 13

Conversely, trade between India and the US experienced a slight decline.

Energy and Environment

China extends green tech lead to carbon capture and sequestration

Nikkei Asia, May 19

Beijing holds three times as many patents in the area than the US.

China and India still rely heavily on coal, climate targets remain 'very difficult' to achieve

CNBC, May 13

While India and China have ambitious plans to cut emissions, heavy reliance on coal continues to be the most reliable and affordable way of meet rising electricity demand.

India Overtook China to Become Biggest Buyer of Russian Crude Oil in April

The Wire, May 1

In April, Indian purchases of Russian oil exceeded Chinese imports by 450,000 barrels per day.

Analyses

An India-China thaw may be on the horizon if Modi is re-elected

South China Morning Post, May 15

By Syed Munir Khasru, Chairman of The Institute for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance (IPAG)

But if Modi wins a third term, he may be motivated to seek a thaw and improve his legacy as a statesman.

India's Economy Isn't the New China (Yet)

Wall Street Journal, May 8

By Sadanand Dhume, Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute

Its ascent is evident, but its per capita GDP is only a little more than half of Indonesia's.

It's Still the Indian Ocean: Parsing Sino-Indian Naval Competition Where It Counts

War on the Rocks, May 7

By Prashant Hosur Suhas, Assistant Professor at Clarkson University; and Christopher K. Colley, Assistant Professor at the US Air War College

Discussions in New Delhi on geostrategic issues are heavily dominated by China and over the last few years there has been a great deal of attention paid to the maritime dimension of the rivalry.

China and India Must Establish a Relational Baseline

China-US Focus, May 7

By Brian Wong, Assistant Professor in Philosophy, HKU and Rhodes Scholar

Recent statements and rhetoric articulated by both China and India indicate that their leaders are keen to prevent further palpable deterioration in bilateral relations.

China Is Revamping Its Military, And India Must Not Take It Lightly

NDTV, May 2

By Harsh V. Pant, Professor of International Relations at King's College London

China's military modernisation poses several significant consequences for India, both in terms of security dynamics and strategic calculations.

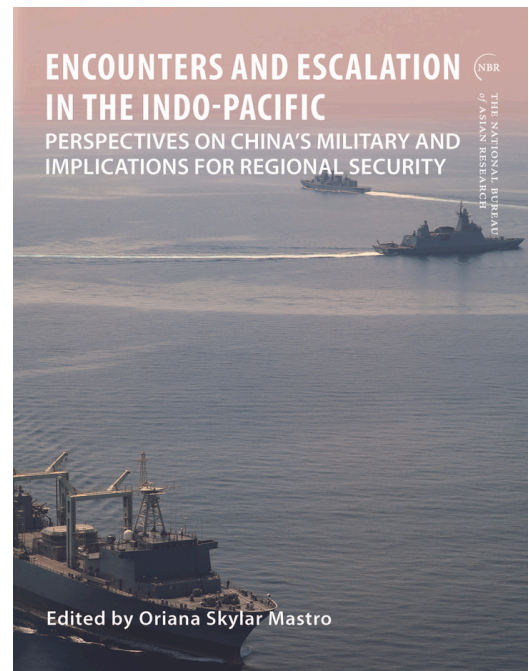
Books and Journals

Encounters and Escalation in the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives on China's Military and Implications for Regional Security

NBR Special Report No. 108, May 7

Edited by Oriana Skylar Mastro, Center Fellow at Stanford University's Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI)

China's military modernization, coupled with increasingly assertive behavior, has led to more frequent and dangerous encounters between the PLA and the militaries of countries across the Indo-Pacific. These interactions have heightened tensions, with specific incidents emphasizing the risk of miscalculations that could escalate into major conflicts. Through case studies on Australia, India, Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam, this report aims to understand the PLA's strategic calculus on escalation, assessing the potential for conflict in the region and exploring shared threat perceptions, regional responses, and implications for deterrence.



Our team



Byron Chong is the editor for the *China-India Brief*. He is a Research Associate with the Centre on Asia and Globalisation, part of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore. He has a Masters in Strategic Studies from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, at Nanyang Technological University.

 @WenzhongByron

 sppcwb@nus.edu.sg



Mae Chow is a Research Assistant at the Centre on Asia and Globalisation. She has a Masters in International Affairs with a specialisation in International Security from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

 mae.chow@nus.edu.sg

THE CENTRE ON ASIA AND GLOBALISATION

The Centre on Asia and Globalisation is a research centre at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. It conducts in-depth research on developments in the Asia-Pacific and beyond, and aims to provide academics, decision-makers, and the general public with objective analysis on issues of regional and global significance. The Centre's motto "Objective Research with Impact" reflects its commitment towards ensuring that its analysis informs policy and decision makers in and about Asia.

OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

- *Partnership or Polarization? Southeast Asian Security between India and China* edited by Evan Laksmana and Byron Chong (Contemporary Southeast Asia, 2023)
- *Asian Conceptions of International Order: What Asia Wants* edited by Kanti Bajpai and Evan Laksmana (International Affairs, 2023)
- *How Realist Is India's National Security Policy?* edited by Kanti Bajpai (Routledge, 2023)
- *Deterring Conflict and Preserving Peace in Asia* edited by Drew Thompson and Byron Chong (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, 2022)
- *What Can the United States Learn from China about Infrastructure?* by Selina Ho in *The China Questions 2* (Harvard University Press, 2022)
- *India Versus China: Why they are Not Friends* by Kanti Bajpai (Juggernaut Books, 2021)
- *Winning the Fight Taiwan Cannot Afford to Lose* by Drew Thompson (Strategic Forum, 2021)
- *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations* edited by Kanti Bajpai, Selina Ho and Manjari Chatterjee Miller (Routledge, 2020)



Compiled and sent to you by Centre on Asia and Globalisation
and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

China-India Brief is supported by Wilmar International Limited

Feedback or comment?

Contact our Editor: Byron Chong (Research Associate) sppcwb@nus.edu.sg

Subscribe: <https://cag-lkyspp.com/cib-subscribe>