

China-India Brief

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Guest Column

China and India Largely Converge in Their Visions of the Asian Security Order

By Richard Ghiasy

Existing literature and commentary generally discuss Chinese and Indian visions for the Asian security order individually and often with a regional focus. In turn, this commentary analyses Chinese and Indian visions at the continental, conceptual, and processual levels—highlighting Asian security order *and* ordering, i.e., the process of creating an order.

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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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First, however, we must be conscious of two facts: the concept of Asia and the concept of security order. In both cases, there is a conceptual challenge. Concepts matter. Asia's historical and contemporary canvas is unique, as is the current constellation of major and great powers. Moreover, territorially, Asia is huge. Geography and proximity are critical determinants in threat perception, power balancing, and security ordering realities. 'Asia' is a geographic concept that Western historians, cartographers, and strategists have primarily advanced, and we cannot simply extrapolate security thinking and concepts of, e.g., the Transatlantic to Asia.

Asia is ethnically, religiously, (socio-)politically, and economically *exceedingly* heterogeneous. This diversity is in stark contrast to, for instance, Europe. The diversity of Asia does not facilitate a pan-Asian identity. For all these reasons, a pan-Asian security order is, almost by definition, a cul-de-sac. Chinese and Indian analysts and policy practitioners are aware of this.

Moreover, there is **no consensus** among scholars and practitioners regarding the definition of polysemic concepts such as "order," "security," and, therefore, an Asian security order. This leads to imprecise use of these concepts and, hence, also inaccurate interpretations. In this commentary, 'security order' is the concept of maintaining security and stability in a given environment. It refers to establishing formal frameworks, rules, and policies that

guide security relations between states, and aim to prevent conflicts and ensure the safety of states. With this set out, let us focus on China and India.

In sync with their reemergence, China and India are stepping up to ensure their prosperity and safety and shape the Asian security order. China, more advanced across most metrics of power and arguably more ambitious than India, has progressed its vision for **thinking on security** and the Asian security order since around the **turn of the century**. It has strongly picked up pace in conceptualisation and operationalisation in President Xi Jinping's administration. Meanwhile, India is gradually mending its vision for the Asian security order, currently a bit of a patchwork of emerging concepts and principles.

China's vision for the Asian security order is based on "indivisible security." Contrary to the US collective security approach through NATO in the Transatlantic community and its so-called hub-and-spokes alliance system in the Asia-Pacific with partners Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand, China's vision is much less material and more comprehensive also to encompass **development and non-traditional security (NTS)**. However, China's indivisible security is 'divisible,' as it wants to exclude non-Asian powers in the Asian security order.



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Still, China is realistic and pragmatic enough to realise that it cannot unilaterally shape and dominate a pan-Asian security order like the US did for the Western Hemisphere. Neither does China want to convey an image to Asia that it has a set-in-stone unilateral vision for the Asian security order. Therefore, China adopts an open-ended, multipolar, multilateralist vision for Asia's security order. China is (as is India) **aware** of Asian realities across Asia's scope and geography, civilisational diversity, geopolitics, power balancing, and its own lack of legitimacy to lead a contemporary (East-)Asian security order.

In essence, China's open-ended vision is **processual**, attempting to—as orderly as possible—transform Asian security perceptions and principles through **dialogue and cooperation**. China concentrates on security ordering rather than security order, including through its

unfolding 3i's: the **global security, global development, and global civilisation** initiatives. Through this approach, China hopes to take the edge off the perceived threat of its rise, evade costly power-balancing vis-à-vis the US and allies and partners that it is unlikely to “win,” and delegitimise US-led binary collective security ordering norms. For many economically underdeveloped nations in Asia (and beyond), the reinterpretation and re-hierarchisation of security, revolving around development and socio-political stability first, is appealing.

China is quite savvy about how it goes about security order and ordering in Asia. It first sought to fill security vacuums where there was least resistance, primarily in continental Asia. Not materially, but by creating political consensus and sharing operationalisation across NTS by politically securing its continental flanks: Russia, Central Asia,

Afghanistan, Pakistan, and, to an extent, Southeast Asia. It has mainly pursued cooperation and coordination through low-hanging non-traditional security fruits, such as counter-terrorism, but also because large swaths of continental Asia are authoritarian or politically frail. Thus, regime security, like in China, features prominently. Indeed, in maritime Asia, particularly the Asia-Pacific, where the US-led hub-and-spokes security architecture prevails, China's attempts to reshape the security order and sell indivisible security have been mostly brushed aside.

In turn, India has a more fragmented and, therefore, less propagated vision. But it is slowly coming together. India is primarily interested in developing its economy and sustaining **strategic autonomy**. India does not want to be pushed, coerced, or even incentivised by anyone: it simply wants its policies to be a product of homegrown thinking and free choice and to do what it concludes is best for India. For this, India needs a stable neighbourhood and a **stable Asia that co-develops economically**. While its neighbourhood, South Asia, is not very stable and one of the world's least integrated, for now, it is not threatening enough to hamper India's economic ambitions.

India's security ordering principles for Asia revolve around multilateralism, inclusive and consensual processes, and multipolarity. An overarching vision is partially emerging through the *Vasudhaiva*

Kutumbakam (or 'the world is one family') concept, conceptually broadly similar to indivisible security. This concept, too, sees security for all family members as a given, as the insecurity of one member affects the cohesion and harmony of the entire family.

Beyond this concept, India needs to act by strategic realities: India wants to make sure that China does not come to dominate Asian security affairs. The scenario of an Asia dominated by China compels India to support shared-leadership notions of Asian security and to welcome the US and European actors (for now) to play a role in the Asian security order and the Indo-Pacific, with the former falling within the latter. Indeed, India's vision of the Asian security order has a **more maritime focus** and extends far and wide into the Indian Ocean. India's foreign and security establishments are pursuing multi-alignment multidirectional trajectories with strong maritime orientations in an agenda to deal with China, the bipolarity that the China-US rivalry produces, and to make sure that the growth of its comprehensive powers is not hampered.

At the same time, India does not currently have the means to shape Asian security affairs amply. This is contrary to China, an example being China's ability to set up the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which has now spread widely, or its reinvigoration of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA). Beyond its

immediate region of South Asia, India has not yet got such convening power. But it is likely a matter of time before it does.

So, where do the visions converge? The degree of convergence between the two Asian giants' visions significantly exceeds divergence. Both India and China are looking to establish a peaceful, stable multipolar and multilateral Asia that sustains their aspirations of national and civilisational revival. Importantly, and in a significant departure from Western collective security approaches, both reject collective security and promote cooperative security. Though, in their most security-critical regions, the Asia-Pacific and South Asia, they do not necessarily always abide by cooperative security norms and power play when their core interests are at risk.

Both actors propagate “oneness” and “indivisibility” and thus inclusive and consensus-driven security ordering and promote cooperation as building blocks for this process. As a result, both pursue security cooperation through development-oriented outreach, though to coalesce the Global South into their respective folds.

This, though, is where the convergences end. As said, China's vision for the Asian security order is conceptually and operationally more coherent and mature than India's. China, of course, also has more material prowess and (partially due to that) diplomatic clout to promote its vision. Contrary to India, China's vision for the

Asian security order has a strong “Asia for Asians” and anti-West rudiment. To corrode China-US bipolarity and limit Chinese power, India does not object to extra-Asian actors engaging in Asian security ordering, including the US and Europe. Nor does India actively delegitimise US security ordering principles the way China does. China's multipolarity is, in fact, Asian multipolarity. India's vision is also driven by creating a more equitable Indo-Pacific instead of China's marginally more continental focus.

To conclude, China primarily concentrates on security ordering rather than a set-in-stone security order. It welcomes Asians to think and discuss ways forward. Through this approach, China hopes to take the edge off the perceived threat of its rise, evade costly power-balancing with the US and its allies, and delegitimise US-led binary collective security ordering principles. India has a more fragmented and, therefore, less propagated vision. It is yet to blossom fully. The tenets of ordering are present, including multilateralism, inclusive and consensual processes, multipolarity, and shared leadership. An overarching values-driven vision is emerging through the “the world is one family” outlook, conceptually similar to China's “indivisible security.” China and India's visions converge substantially through principles, an objection to collective security, and a preference for cooperative security. The primary divergence is China's distaste for

Western involvement in Asian security ordering, whereas India is receptive to extra-Asian multipolar involvement.

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