

The Strategic Imperative: India and China's Pursuit of Peaceful Rise in a Multipolar World Order

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Abstract

In a world dominated by realism it has been presumed as 'obvious' that rise and decline of the great powers in the international system coincides with violence or conflict. The article argues in the contrary. It analyses two rising powers with accelerating economic growth in the Asian continent in the present century- India and China. There are a several similarities between both. The article comments on a puzzling question that, why India and China prefer peaceful rise in a multipolar world order instead of the traditional and widely preferred realist commonsense. It traces the growth story of both these countries and explores their political and diplomatic moves in order to answer the research question. To a considerable extent both India and China in the present times have signalled towards- (a) a preference for averting political tensions and violence both among themselves and with others, (b) active efforts to concentrate towards their respective economic strength and success stories and (c) to accommodate if not acknowledge 'the other' as a rising power in a multipolar world order. This hints towards a neo-liberal model where collaboration,

Introduction:

“The basic structure of the international system forces states concerned about their security to compete with each other for power (and) the ultimate goal of every great power is to maximize its share of world power and eventually dominate the system” (Mearsheimer (2004).

The realist theory of international politics revolves around concepts such as hegemony, domination, and the rise and decline of major powers. On one such pressing realist concern has been the future of the phenomenal rise of China and the rapid and astonishing growth it has achieved. Another rapidly expanding economic power whose parameters of development are quite impressive but is qualitatively different from China is India. A common thread between both these countries is their relative peaceful rise by means other than military, largely economic. A puzzling question is, ‘why India and China prefer a peaceful rise?’ without any expected ‘realist climax’, war and

violence. The central inquiry of this article is the reasons that made this possible.

A much-heated debate in the previous decade has been around the question, ‘whether China can rise peacefully?’ John Mearsheimer, Joseph S. Nye Jr. and others have raised some interesting arguments in this regard. The “realpolitik pessimists see China’s rise as inherently destabilizing” (Kang, 2005). The article attempts to see the rise of both India and China from an alternate position. They have displayed a preference for averting political tensions on the on-going disputes and shown inclination to find solutions in options like negotiation etc. lesser than war and violence. They have actively pursued efforts to magnify their respective economic success stories and also at the same time acknowledged the reality of a multipolar world order. The causes for such an approach by India and China in the 21st century are better explained in the neo-liberal school of thought than the realist school. Neo Liberalism believes that the benefits associated

with cooperation surpass the ones which have been traditionally associated with the use of force. The article unravels the neo-liberal theoretical understanding of the world and applies it to India and China in the contemporary times. Countering some major criticisms from the realist school of thought the paper argues that a future order based, not simply on balancing as a strategy but, one grounded on cooperation and collaboration among the stakeholders in the world politics is the norm of the day. This definitely hints towards a multipolar world model. In the initial two decades of the 21st the Asian region has more profoundly witnessed two great civilizations and states, India and China to have furthered cordial relationship with each other even though they have territorial and border disputes with each other. The answer to the very question- ‘why India and China would prefer a peaceful rise in a multipolar world?’, hints towards an envisioned agenda and strategy. It is definitely not an accident but a well charted out

strategic policy orientation according to which New Delhi and Beijing have gone to neo-liberal way more than the neo-realist traditional wisdom about the rise and fall of the great powers and changing systemic dynamics. Firstly, China and India have well realized the salience of economy in the 21st century which bypasses the traditional dominance of politics. Secondly, wars and violence ceases to reap any benefit in a world where states are in a complex interdependent relationship. The realist bedrock assumption that the rise of a great power has to be in a typical warfare manner also has been widely challenged by the history of the previous two centuries. Thirdly, the goal for a multipolar world order to turn into reality have comparatively better payoff for both India and China than other options.

India and China: An unusual story of similarities

India and China have much in common which has been not widely acknowledged. David Malone points out that apart from being two

ancient civilizations, these two entities incarnated themselves as “modern republics around the same time” (Malone, 2011: 129). “Both countries have lived through tumultuous times domestically and internationally (but presently) they have emerged as rising powers in Asia” (Malone, 2011: 129). The rapidly increasing populations and fast-growing economies have made not just them but overall, the Asian continent as a rising continent in the 21st century. The rest of the world, especially West Europe and the United States of America are highly dependent on Asia in the present century marked by complex interdependence among global actors. The history of the relationship between Beijing and New Delhi hasn’t been smooth in the previous century. There has been a persistent border dispute resulting into the border becoming the Line of actual Control (LAC) between the two. India was also attacked by China which resulted into a war in 1962. But interestingly in the contemporary times they have strategically

mutated their discord, to be specific the boundary dispute as a central reason for derailing talks and negotiations on other matters. The dispute undoubtedly remains central to the strategic and political circles but has not resulted as an obstacle to the multifaceted cooperation between the two states. This has been one central reason to believe that economy, trade and cooperation in a multipolar neo-liberal word order has been recognized as much more salient than political disputes.

The then Prime Minister of Indian, Rajiv Gandhi attempted re-harmonization between India and China. This was .after an approximate two decades of stagnant relationship between two neighbours.

“In December 1988 he made two unprecedented concessions in Indian policy towards China. First, he reversed the decades-old stance that resolution of the border dispute was a precondition for the normalization of relations between India and China. Second, he admitted that some

members of the Tibetan community residing in India were engaged in anti-China activities on Indian soil. This visit was followed by a flurry of high-level diplomatic exchanges during the early 1990s that involved Prime Minister Li Peng in 1991” (Malone, 2011:137).

With the economic liberalization and privatization entering the Indian economic system, the economy became a further priority for the state. This was reciprocated from China also which was a decade in advance than India in liberalizing its market and inviting foreign investments. Even as a communist country the mixed model of economic development China undertook was a unique and unparalleled one. The historical narrative of the late 20th and early 21st centuries indicates that both nations are progressively aligning on multiple fronts, transcending past political animosities. Around the same time the economic story of both India and China has altered for the better. China liberalized in the 1980s and India in the 1990s.

China witnessed tremendous growth in per cent in its GDP post 1980. The journey of the Indian economy and the growth it witnessed post 1990 is noteworthy. From real bad economy in the 1980 it progressed, but was not able to maintain the constancy and suffered losses again in 1990 which compelled it to liberalize its economy and greater integrate in the process of globalization.

On the global front on various issue areas where there are convergence of interests between India and China. There are commonalities and cooperation between India and China in a variety of bilateral and multilateral arenas, economic ties, bilateral trade, space collaboration, climate change, anti-piracy operations, multilateral infrastructural financing, regional multilateral forums like Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Anti-terror approach, New Development Bank (NDB), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) etc. The performance of these two states suggest that they have largely questioned the

conventional wisdom of international relations through their performance. The realist conventional wisdom which regards the rise of great power and inter-state relationships dominated by realism. The counter terror dialogue between India and China is on-going since 2002. This has been further facilitated by India obtaining full membership in the SCO, an organization that specifically focuses on addressing the challenge of combating terrorism. This somehow validates the neo-liberal world view and also that India and China prefer a peaceful growth and rise in a multipolar world order.

The Strategic Salience of Economy over Politics in the 21st century

Economic growth is the first argument, implying to which India and China rose through a neo-liberal way. The argument by John Mearsheimer on the Chinese rise acknowledges the variable of economy as the nucleus of the power calculus in the present world scenario. This has been predominantly true for most

imperial powers as well. The point Mearsheimer wish to communicate regarding the salience of economy in the world politics is definitely a valid one but the conclusion he puts forward requires a further critical examination. He believes that, “if China continues its impressive economic growth over the next few decades the United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war” (Mearsheimer, 2014). There are some crucial conclusions with which the growth of China has been associated with an intense security competition and potential for war. The following argument on the Indian and Chinese economic growth tries to unravel their respective economic development in the last quarter of the previous century and the first of the present century. It also reaffirms the phenomenal rise in the form of economic growth experienced by these two states. But this at the same time does not necessarily lead to war or high probabilities of war within them and also with them and others. The thought

from Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese seems applicable here which discourages military option to achieve one's interests this brings in perspective the salience China puts on economic statecraft. Geo-economics tends to be cheaper than military means (Li He, 2017).

The Indian economy had been experiencing very modest growth prior to the 1990s. Some observers have termed it as a typical 'Hindu Rate of Growth'¹. But post-1990 the country has phenomenally transformed its economy and growth. In the case of the Chinese economy, the trend after the 1950 Communist Revolution was no better than that of India in the initial decades of its decolonization. The economy opened up to investment, free market reforms and foreign trade in 1979. As per Wayne M. Morrison, "prior to the initiation of economic reforms and

trade liberalization 36 years ago, China maintained policies that kept the economy very poor, stagnant, centrally-controlled, vastly inefficient, and relatively isolated from the global economy" (Morrison, 2015).

However, following its liberalization, it attained an annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth averaging close to 10%, a rate comparable to some of the fastest-growing economies globally (Morrison, 2015). According to most economists having expertise on China and its economic model, the reasons behind "the rapid growth rate of the Chinese economy have been attributed to extensive capital investment (supported by significant domestic savings and foreign investment) and swift productivity enhancements". The answer to the question- Why the importance of economy supersedes politics in the contemporary world scenario is explicit from the Chinese growth story. Beijing continues its trade relationship with several major players with whom it does not share equally cordial political relationship. The 2014

¹ Hindu rate of growth is a term referring to a typical low annual growth rate of the planned economy of India for around three to four decades before the economic liberalisations of 1991. The growth rate was stuck around 3.5%- 4% in the period 1950s to 1980s. The term was coined by economist Raj Krishna in 1978. It is understood as a derogatory phrase. The phrase shows that the country was unable to touch its economic potential. Disclaimer: The authors of this article do not endorse this phrase and the related terminology.

data on trade volumes of China with its seven largest partner countries suggests Chinese that “China’s top three export markets were the United States, the EU28, and Hong Kong, while its top sources for imports were the EU28, ASEAN, and South Korea” (Morrison, 2015). A combination of bilateral and multilateral efforts on part of China suggests its economic standing.

India and China in a Complex Interdependence World

There has been certain dedicated effort from the Indian and Chinese side to expand their respective economic growth. Some major recent developments by India, like the Make in India initiative, Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and increasing share of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and similarly developments like the One Belt One Road (OBOR), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Maritime Silk Road etc. are welcoming steps to invite foreign investment by China. Both the states are struggling to attain an economic advantage for themselves in a globalised world. Many scholars agree that the

Belt and Road initiative of China would contribute to the overall trend of its rapid economic growth. The One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative has also been perceived as China’s blueprint for worldwide peace and prosperity; others also view it China’s ‘grand strategy’ to dominate the regional geoeconomics and geopolitics. India has remained outside the China-led trans-continental, major infrastructural projects like BRI due to a variety of geo-political reasons. A chief reason being the BRI running through many parts of the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) which is in violation of Indian national interest. Nevertheless, wide participation and audience to the China-led projects suggest a multilateral angle to the otherwise Chinese unilateral efforts.

The particular trade volumes and interdependency in the bilateral relationship between the US and China imply that economic ties may hold more significance than political relations. In March 2017 the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi asserted that, “China will

continue to be an anchor of international stability, an engine of global growth, a champion of peace and development, and a contributor to global governance. These pronouncements, in essence are demonstrative of China's role in global affairs" (China Daily, 2017).

Multipolarity and 'Peaceful Rise'

John Mearsheimer has analysed "the rise of China" from a realist lens citing the rise of China as something with "almost certainly...the most important geopolitical development of the twenty-first century". (Mearsheimer, 2014). There have been several debates on the "rise of China" as a term and its connotations. The west has interpreted it from a simple rise and fall of great powers, realist lens. Yet there has been a Chinese response on the term that hardly has been acknowledged. But when looked from a Chinese understanding of the very term 'peaceful rise' there is varied interpretation. Zheng Bijian, a high-ranking official of the

Communist Party coined the term 'Peaceful Rise of China' (Ekka, 2015).

The 'Alternate English words to replace "rise" such as "emergence", "resurrection", "re-emergence" and "revival were discussed and finally at the 2004 Bo'ao Asia Forum it was replaced by "Peaceful Development"' (Ekka, 2015).

Often, inefficient translation practices along with cultural and civilizational disparities have the potential to alter the true essence of the original source. This overall raises a totally new debate around the interpretation and perception. From the US and other European country's perspectives, Beijing is seen as a great power challenging the accepted and continuing world order. This is from a typical realpolitik perspective. Unfortunately, the opinion builds up about China and its probable foreign policy goals have followed 'the' dominant narrative painting a somewhat gloomy picture on China in particular and the future of the world, in general.

However, in addition to the predictions of realists, what we've observed is China portraying a narrative influenced by the complex interdependence school of thought. In the previous two decades China has opted for memberships of more multilateral institutions and global governance institutions than ever before. The Chinese foreign minister and leadership have time and again pledged the resolve to strengthen the Chinese involvement and role in the multilateral institutions including the United Nations. Some argue that China attempts to also challenge the existing institutions of global governance ever since it has been instrumental in founding the the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRICS, the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) institutions yet one can see the same with optimism too. How being a party to them China is also become an abider of the norms and laws like others? The Chinese accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) serves as

a prime illustration of how its entry in 2001 has fostered greater positivity and inclusivity in global economic governance. China in NSG Similarly BRICS is not an institution which has empowered just China but one which devised a more meaningful institutionalized way of dialogue between some growing economies of the world. If the one looks at the global picture shedding the western realist one realizes that China has shown more inclination to shoulder more responsibilities at global systems of governance through building up multilateral institutions, regional economic institutions, etc. 'The Foreign Minister in 2017 also added that 'the nations must "rise above the zero-sum mentality" and work towards forging a robust and mature relationship'. On the other hand, the realist theory has also contemplated on the expected behaviour from China if it chooses to rise drafting all the states in relative terms. They believe that it would seek to dominate Asia in a similar way how the United States dominated the globe. Mearsheimer also believes that

“China would seek to maximize the power gap between itself and its neighbours, especially Japan and Russia” and also through military superiority would ensure that it retains its powerful position so that ‘no state in Asia has the wherewithal to threaten it’ (Mearsheimer, 2004). When the international system backdrop has been set by the realist theory it has been largely taken for granted that the Chinese economic and to some extent a resultant political rise cannot be peaceful.

India has had a reputation for being involved in multilateralism from its very initial days of decolonization. New Delhi It has been associated with a number of international organizations including the UN, GATT, WTO, etc since their establishment. The soft power credentials of India exceed that of China. The civilizational linkages of India in the region are well known and documented. The Indian economy after almost twenty-five years of liberalization stands tall. There is optimism and hope associated with the Indian economy. India

abides by a multilateral approach, and it believes in multi-polarity. India was an founding and original member of the Non-Alignment Movement during the Cold War years. India is understood as an outlier as it stood against the realist feature of bipolarity. India has time and again challenged the unipolarity or global hegemony of a global actor.

Conclusion

In a discipline dominated by realism it is hard to assume that peace and cooperation between two roughly equal states is possible and most importantly desirable by their respective governments. Above that applying the same on two states, India and China further opens a Pandora's box of opinions and perspectives of international political analysts. The economic progression of specifically China has hardly been theorised in a needful manner. Precariousness has been deeply associated with the economy. It has often been equated to a capitalist bubble which can pop any day in the future. India also has often not counted among

major powers by the realist calculus in Asia. The Indian story in the 21st century is also pretty impressive and deserves a place in the understanding of the region through a theoretical perspective. The complex interdependence and the charm and expected benefits out of collaborative endeavours between states hints towards a multi-polar world order predicting the realist vision of bipolarity or unipolarity both lesser attractive and applicable.

Methodology

The present article attempted an empirical study of the foreign policy decision making and the particular aspect of peaceful rise of two emerging countries in the Global South- India and China. It is a theoretical study of neo-liberal school of thought or the complex interdependence theory. The article attempts to understand the foreign policy behaviour of these two states from a theoretical perspective. It relies both on primary and secondary data obtained from government reports and books

and journals. E- sources constitute an important component of the study. While executing the study, an amalgam of historical, analytical, comparative and descriptive methodology has been used.

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