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Perception and Evolution in the Making of China and India as Great Powers

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CHRIS OGDEN, MAY 25 2017

Asia is on the rise. China and India account for ever-greater shares of global GDP, and are translating this economic prowess into ever-higher rates of military expenditure. Along with their increasing influence in the functioning and creation of international institutions, Beijing and New Delhi are set to become two of the most significant powers in the international relations of the 21st century. As such, they will become great powers – top tier states that delineate and dictate the global politics and diplomacy – and a mantle that will place them on a par with other major power centres such as the European Union, Russia, and even, potentially, the United States.

What constitutes great power remains contested within IR. Such discussions mainly equivocate between those accounts concerned with the supremacy of military power (realism in most of its forms) and those focused upon economic and institutional power, including the provision of responsibility and managing international society (most aspects of liberalism). Additional standpoints encompass ideational sources of great power, which principally scrutinize identities, norms and perceptions (namely various kinds of constructivism, along with classical realism).

What remains clear however is that these various viewpoints necessarily coalesce, whereby the meaning or intent attributed to a given power source gains primacy. Are military capabilities seen to be defensive or offensive for example? Or do enhanced trade links worsen rivalry by allowing states to amass power or do they inculcate interdependence and stability? In these ways, the culture and identities of states become dominant analytical touchstones and, within these, perception and its evolution are of critical importance regarding how we comprehend the world.

Perception

For China, the perception of an aggressive and coercive international system was fomented through Beijing's negative experiences during the 'Century of Humiliation', the narrative of which has had a significant impact upon the guiding structure of its domestic and foreign policy. This perception influences elites' perceptions concerning the fundamental principles dictating how they view the world, as enshrined within China's strategic culture. The use and efficacy of material power are vitally influenced by such perceptions (and indeed buoyed by direct experience), with military power regarded as a necessary tool both during (offensively) and after (defensively) the Cold War. Such perceptions continue to be reflected in Beijing's attitude towards economics, with the benefits of engagement outweighing risks from the 1980s onwards.

Regionally, entrenched threat perceptions emanating from toxic, unresolved and status-driven contestation continue to be the hallmark of relations with Japan, and dominate ties between the two states – a situation echoed in India-Pakistan affairs. Further displaying how perceptions can influence attitudes towards a particular power source, China's multilateral engagement has also developed owing to the changing perceptions of its leaders concerning its overall usefulness, especially when intertwined with a central desire to maximize its material power quotients. Most conspicuously, it is within Beijing's relations with the United States that perceptions have the most saliency – with negative perceptions between the two entities seemingly acting as triggers for conflict, and positive perceptions acting as potential foundations for peaceful collaboration.

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Written by Chris Ogden

For India, its leaders' understandings of the international system have been formed via New Delhi's historical international interaction. At its heart, there is a critical deep-seated distrust and suspicion of other major powers' intentions towards India, as premised upon negative colonial experiences. These perceptions also entail India's desired self-image to be a great power, and are evident across the full range of its interaction. Within its strategic culture, conceptions of how the world ought to be are driven forward by anti-imperialist, non-interventionist and multipolarity sentiments in its elites' thinking. These directly impact upon how India's elites regard the role to be played by material power measures, such as military prowess and economic strength.

Perceptions of benignancy, Third World leadership and avoiding great power rivalry dictated India's non-acquisition of military power before the 1962 war with China, but India's defeat in that conflict replaced this precept with an understanding that military means were now necessary. Equally, until the 1990s, New Delhi's reading of the global economic system as threatening and coercive led to minimal engagement, but this was then supplanted (not replaced) by a perception of the benefits of such interaction after 1991. Perceptions of dominance also influence India's desired position in South Asia, whereby India regards itself as the region's natural hegemon. New Delhi's multilateral engagement is equally determined by a shifting mélange of these same perceptions of benefit or threat, as have Indo-US ties, such that ongoing historical fluctuations between divergence and convergence have been based upon their inter-perceptual interaction.

Evolution

Change, learning and progression have also been recognizable parameters within the ascent of Asia's largest states. India's foreign policy behaviour has seen many transformations over the last sixty years, as a result of its greater learning from – and interaction with – the international system and its constituent states. Although still wary of other states' intentions towards her, India's elites have shifted their worldviews from being wholly idealist (under Nehru) to being much more realistic and pragmatic in orientation. Key interactions have played into this change, most notably the 1962 war with China, which served to socialize India into the necessity of having a hard military capacity, and its embrace of *realpolitik* in the 1971 East Pakistan War. Elite attitudes towards nuclear weapons have also gradually gestated, allowing for their attainment in 1998.

With regard to economics, a crisis (in 1991) accelerated India's economic liberalization. Such considerations (and the Soviet Union's decline) also influenced India's regional outlook (although not its underlying expectation of its own superiority), and have led to an approach towards most of its neighbours that is more benevolent than coercive. Regarding multilateral institutions, there is less evidence of evolution as India supported the Non Aligned Movement in the 1950s along with the United Nations. Instead, it has been the scope of New Delhi's involvement within the UN that has changed, as it has gradually demanded a permanent veto seat. The greatest transformation of all has been in Indo-US relations, which have evolved from being beset by tension and divergence to one that encapsulates India's growing global power across all spheres.

For Beijing, its elites' perception of the world has evolved from initial high levels of suspicion (leading to China's isolationist proclivities) to a gradual acclimatization towards the benefits of deeper involvement. On this basis, the ideologically charged view of the Mao era has given way to the pragmatism of his successors – a change informed by Beijing's heightened engagement across all spheres. Elements in China's strategic culture reflect these dynamics, along with shifting understandings relating to the use of military force – from total war to a more local focus. Fundamental policy moves have been further discernible within economics, as again elite thinking informed the basis and realization of China's trade relations with other states, whose cost-benefit equation has been transformed from being regarded as highly negative to positive.

Regionally, Beijing's self-awareness of its own rising stature, along with the need for a peaceful environment to better harness economic stability, has led to a further change in focus, with official policy largely evolving away from aggressively exporting communism to being a partner and friend (notwithstanding the South China Sea). Equally, China's initial reluctance and caution towards multilateral involvement has now been replaced by confidence and innovation, as shown by its creation of groupings such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Finally, relations between China and the United States continue to reflect these

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multiple areas of evolution, as witnessed by increased trade and multilateral and regional linkages, although these are still beset by distrust and rivalry.

When looking at China and India, and great powers in general, both perception and evolution remain of paramount importance. Concerning perception, it is crucial in terms of enmity and alliance but also regarding social peer acknowledgement and validity. Concurrently, varying perceptions also demonstrate similarity and difference in global politics, and importantly indicate how China and India view the international system (as well as their place within it) and the other (great) powers, and how these worldviews can foster commonality and disparity internationally.

How states think about, interact with and ultimately demarcate the system is also in continual flux. This emphasis points to the criticality of examining the core values essential to a state's security policy, and appreciating that foreign policy and international affairs rests upon state-specific understandings. Such values and identities alter over time – along with the practices / rules of the international structure. Moreover, and on a more fundamental level, great power – as a definition, behaviour and condition – is also constantly evolving, and will continue to do so.

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