

Frédéric Grare, *India turns East: International Engagement and US-China Rivalry*

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India's Look East Policy, launched soon after the end of the Cold War in 1991–92, was upgraded to the Act East Policy in 2014 as India tried to inject a sense of urgency in its approach towards the countries of East Asia (Southeast and Northeast Asia). At the heart of India's eastward thrust is the quest to ensconce itself as a major power in the strategic architecture of Asia. In this very timely book, Frédéric Grare analyses how India's eastern endeavour is going to be affected by US-China rivalry. Grare is a non-resident senior fellow with the Carnegie Endowment's South Asia program and a former senior official at the French Defense Ministry's Directorate of Strategic Affairs. He has extensive knowledge of South Asia having spent time in India and Pakistan in various capacities. He is also the author/editor of many important works on India's relations with East Asia.¹

In the book, Grare draws from his intimate knowledge of the region, and his substantial corpus of scholarship (that goes back at least two decades) as he tries to make strategic sense of India's eastern engagement. While the emphasis on the US-China rivalry forms the overarching structural framework of Grare's analysis, his work is sensitive to the nuances of the growing partnership between the United States and India as well as the factors affecting the Sino-Indian rivalry.

The book is divided into eight chapters in addition to an introduction and conclusion. These chapters are focused on: the strategic drivers of India's Look East Policy with an emphasis on China and the United States; defense relationships with Southeast Asia, especially Myanmar; relations with other like-minded Indo-Pacific democracies, Japan and Australia; and the strategic dimensions of India's politico-economic and institutional engagement with East Asia. Grare concludes this well-organized and well-argued book by offering us his insights into the future of US-India relations.

The book is full of important nuances and insights such as Grare's observation that India's Look East Policy "did not develop all at once" (p. 6) and that "it should be understood as a dynamic approach rather than as a set of pre-ordained policies articulated around a clearly defined strategy" (p. 5). Notably, the very first sentence of this book begins with the following observation: "Managing China's rise was an

¹ For example, Frédéric Grare and Amitabh Mattoo, eds., *India and ASEAN: The Politics of India's Look East Policy* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001).

Indian concern long before it became an American one” (p.1). The bulk of Grare’s analysis is focused on the following two questions. First, will the Look East Policy allow India to address its key concerns *vis-à-vis* China in the strategic context of India and China’s “parallel” but “asymmetric” rise (given that China began its economic transformation in 1978, more than a decade before India began its own economic reforms in 1991; and because China has grown much faster than India in the ensuing period)? Second, how deep is the congruence between India’s Look East Policy and America’s pivot/rebalance to Asia?

It must be emphasised that Grare answers the above questions by focusing largely on systemic/structural factors. Grare notes that China is India’s “main security challenge” (p. 30) for three primary reasons – Tibet/border, Pakistan, and the Indian Ocean. India has been reaching out to its East Asian neighbours (many of whom are struggling to adjust to China’s phenomenal rise) in the context of China’s rapidly growing power *vis-à-vis* India and because New Delhi sees Chinese power to its north (Tibet), west (Pakistan), and increasingly to its south (the Indian Ocean), thereby making the “east” attractive. Grare argues that military power “differential between the two countries [China and India] is not getting smaller” (p. 37), and that “India is unlikely to catch up economically in the foreseeable future” (p. 41).

It is in this context that India has discovered the United States in East Asia. Given the United States’ own rivalry with China, Grare argues that America has “seemingly arrived at an implicit understanding that a strong but autonomous India contributes to the United States’ interests in the region” by helping prevent Chinese hegemony (p. 48). Consequently, he states that America is “officially willing to contribute to the modernization of India’s armed forces without a reciprocal commitment that the United States does not need and India does not want” (p. 48). These few powerful statements in fact constitute the central thesis of this book.

Grare is essentially arguing that India remains ambivalent towards a very close alliance-like relationship with the United States due to structural differences between the US-China and China-India dyads. For Grare, the huge power differential between the United States and India (with the former but not the latter being more powerful than China) along with India’s (but not the United States’) geographical contiguity with China means that there is a limit to what the United States and India can achieve together. New Delhi remains sensitive to both, a deterioration in US-China relations (which may make India a frontline state in any US effort to balance/contain China if India were to tightly embrace the United States), as well as to US-China rapprochement (which may come at India’s expense given that India is the least powerful of the three).

Therefore, even if there is strategic congruence between the United States and India – as neither wants to see a China-dominated East Asia – there are limits to what the United States and India can do together in that region. If anything, actual policy choices in Washington and New Delhi may further reduce avenues for policy coordination. New Delhi’s quest for strategic autonomy may pose actual limits, while America’s own policies like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement actually leave India out. (The TPP has now gone ahead without the United States’ participation after President Trump withdrew from the negotiations. However, Grare’s bigger point is that some of America’s initiatives in East Asia may leave India out).

Grare concludes by arguing that even if there is genuine congruence of worldviews between India and the United States, especially in East Asia, there are structural limits to what they can achieve together (even if India and the United States want to advance their relationship). Since it is the weakest power in this trifecta, what India and the United States can ultimately achieve together will be a function of India's own rise.

This is a cogent argument, and Grare's analysis is theoretically coherent too, as it is rooted in structural analysis. However, there are at least three factors that need further consideration. First, what will be the implications of a narrowing of the power differential between China and India (since Grare's analysis is premised on the fact that there is a large power gap and, on the assumption that it is not getting smaller)? However, a recent economic outlook for the next decade (2015–2025) by McKinsey concluded that India will grow faster than China (in all four projected scenarios).² In other words, it is possible that India will be the only major power over the next decade that will begin to narrow the power differential with China (although India is unlikely to close it any time soon). At the same time, the relative power differential will shift in China's favor *vis-à-vis* all other major powers (such as the United States and Japan) as China will continue to grow faster than all of them (albeit at a reduced growth rate). How might the United States and India relate to each other if the structural factors affecting their relationship begin to (slowly) change? Second (and relatedly), Grare's analysis is implicitly based on the belief that China will continue with its rapid ascent. Are there any structural factors (such as internal demographic changes within China or the changing nature of the global economy externally) that at least warrant some caution? Third, and finally, Grare's structural analysis is rooted in material power and physical geography. However, states, especially rising powers, also care about status (or relative position). How will India's quest for status affect its relationship with the United States if India's power differential with China continues to remain large? How will the quest for status affect the US-India relationship if India begins to narrow this differential? These questions notwithstanding, this book will become the essential reading for all scholars and policymakers interested in US-China-India relations and the emerging strategic architecture in Asia.

2 Luis Enriquez, Sven Smit, and Jonathan Ablett, "Shifting Tides: Global Economic Scenarios for 2015-2025," *McKinsey*, September 2015, available: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/shifting-tides-global-economic-scenarios-for-2015-25> (accessed: 25 March 2018).