

## Strategic Cultures: Pax Sinica versus Pax Indica

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*Editor's Note: This article is reproduced from the book by the author, CHINA AND INDIA: GREAT POWER RIVALS (Lynne Rienner and Viva Books, 2011). Chinese belligerence on its border with India and indeed at the borders with all its other neighbours is a recurring feature in Chinese history, which arises from a worldview that places China at the centre of the world. This article is extremely relevant today, as it was when it was written nearly a decade ago, to understand the Chinese behaviour and policies toward India.*

As ancient civilisations, China and India coexisted in peace and harmony for millennia. As postcolonial modern nation-states, however, with the exception of a very short period of bonhomie in the early 1950s, relations between the two Asian giants have been marked by conflict, containment, mutual suspicion, distrust, and rivalry. Just as the Indian sub-continental plate has a tendency to constantly rub and push against the Eurasian tectonic plate, causing friction and volatility in the entire Himalayan mountain range, India's bilateral relationship with China also remains volatile and friction- and tension-ridden. Most observers of China-India relations believe that factors such as the border dispute, the Cold War alignments, power asymmetry, mutual distrust, and more recently, nuclear and resource security issues are the major causes of tortuous and uneasy relations between the two Asian giants. I maintain, however, that there is a fundamental clash of interests between China and India that is rooted in their strategic cultures, history, geo-economics, and

geopolitics. The biggest obstacle to Sino-Indian amity is that both countries aspire to the same things at the same time on the same continental landmass and its adjoining waters.<sup>1</sup>

To understand the roles China and India want to play on the international stage in the twenty-first century, we first need to return to history to gain an understanding of their roles and relationship several millennia ago. Both China and India have gone through regular periods of decline and resurgence. In China's case the period of decline lasted for nearly two centuries, while in India's case, it lasted for a millennium. Much like China in eastern Asia, modern India has inherited, and recognises, a long historical and cultural tradition of Indic civilisation in southern Asia. Therefore, it is important to consider the influences of history and culture as well as the physical facts of geography and demography upon the Chinese and Indian governments' views of the world and of their own roles in the international system.

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## Strategic Culture

The way a country's interests are conceptualised, defined, and defended is influenced by its unique historical and cultural experiences.<sup>2</sup> Strategic culture consists of widely shared beliefs—including worldviews, traditions, attitudes, symbols, myths, self-image, and identity—related to a nation's self-representation and its "proper" role in world politics. Political and military elites socialised in different cultural contexts may behave in different ways and make different choices, even when placed in similar situations. For example, as a result of "beliefs" about "historic role," "self-image," and "identity," there is a powerful elite consensus in both China and India that as the two oldest civilisations and once-great powers which were subjected to centuries of European domination, they must acquire the *full* spectrum of economic, technological, and military (conventional, nuclear, information, and space) capabilities in order to be dominant regionally and influential globally. What eludes the Western understanding of Asia is the sense of national destiny that drives China and India's ambitions. Many maintain that there was no "India" or "China" before the twentieth century. Whether we can speak of an India or a China in the past or not, the fact is that China and India's strategic cultures are a function of historical experiences and perceptions of their appropriate roles in the world. Strategic culture is not a trivial variable in the description or explanation of strategic behaviour. There is a degree of continuity in pre-modern strategic cultures of China and India into the modern age. It is the lack of understanding of Asian

history and strategic cultures before the arrival of Europeans that has left many observers confused and perplexed as to what India is up to. Many analysts opine that India behaves as if it were the successor to the British Raj. While true, this does not take into account the fact that India (like China) had also existed both as an ancient civilisation and as an empire (albeit, for much shorter periods than China) in southern Asia for centuries before it became a British colony. India's traditional historical and cultural ties with Central and Southeast Asia *do* influence Indian perceptions of, and more importantly, its ambitions for, its future role in Asia. It was this lack of understanding of India's strategic culture that led Therese Delpech to wonder why it is "poor and weak India," not rich Japan that is challenging China's role in the post-Cold War Asia.<sup>3</sup>

Before discussing the history of China-India relations and their strategic cultures, it is useful to point out that this approach does not assume that strategic culture is the sole determinant of decisions in national security policy, but that it is an important determinant. The future has a past but the future does not necessarily resemble the past. Also, this approach does not imply that domestic political and ideological variables or structural factors (such as relative power capabilities, alliance patterns, and external threats) do not explain Chinese or Indian foreign policy behaviour. Finally, it does not follow that strategic culture is so unchanging and rigid that it is insusceptible to change over time in the face of conflicting reality and experience. This approach, however, does assume that strategic culture is powerful in influencing national roles,

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capabilities, interests, and ambitions. Alastair Johnston's study of Chinese strategic culture suggests that strategic culture is a key variable in the explanation of China's strategic behaviour. There is, at least in the Chinese case, "a long-term, deeply rooted, persistent, and consistent set of assumptions about the strategic environment and about the best means of dealing with it."<sup>4</sup> And George Tanham's study of India's strategic culture shows that this is true of India as well.<sup>5</sup>

### **From Civilisations to Nation-States**

China and India are two of the world's oldest continuing civilisations, each with the quality of resilience that has enabled it to survive and prosper through the ages and against all odds. In contrast, several other ancient civilisations either disappeared or were subsumed by others. During the past 3,000 years, every one of the Asian countries—some situated on the continental landmass, others being islands off the mainland Asia—has at some stage been directly influenced by one or both of these two great civilisations. Much like China in eastern Asia, modern India has inherited, and recognises, a long historical and cultural tradition of Indic civilisation in southern Asia. As the future originates in the impulses of the past, it is appropriate to consider some of the influences which that history and culture, and the physical facts of geography and demography may have upon the Chinese and Indian governments' worldviews and their roles in the international system. The burden of history indeed weighs very heavily on China and India. Observers of China and India generally agree that the discourse of

civilisation is critical for the construction of Chinese and Indian identities as modern nation-states. Much like China, during the feudal age, India was divided into many states often at war with one another. These states maintained diplomatic relations with each other as if they were foreign countries. Both have a long, rich strategic tradition: both China's *Sun Zi Bingfa* (Sun Tzu's treatise on *The Art of War*) and Kautilya's *Arthshastra* in India (a treatise on war, diplomacy, statecraft, and empire) were written over 2000 years ago.

If China and India had coexisted peacefully for over 2,000 years, it was mainly because they were distant neighbours. The mighty barrier of the Himalayas and Tibet separated the two countries and made political contacts few and far between. In the cultural sphere, it was mostly a one way street—from India to China. From India, Hindu and Buddhist religious and cultural influence spread to China (and Korea and Japan) around the second century CE. Chinese scholars were sent to Indian universities at Nalanda and Taxila. Buddhism enriched and transformed Chinese thought, science, medicine, literature, and fine arts. Ancient India was the object of China's admiration, respect and awe.<sup>6</sup> A seventh-century Chinese commentary on India described it as a "Middle Kingdom":

Lying in the south of the snow mountain (Himalayas) is the Central State (*Zhong guo* in Chinese or *Madhyadesa* in Sanskrit). Her land is plain, her weather temperate regardless of winter or summer. Trees and flowers grow exuberantly all year round. The land is never visited by flowing frost. How can a peripheral state (like China) be comparable to her!<sup>7</sup>

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During this period in history, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and from Kandahar (in Afghanistan) to Kamrup (Assam), India was one civilisational entity.<sup>8</sup> The Hindu Kush mountain ranges in the northwest and Himalayas in the north that acted as the northern frontiers—Indian civilisation’s Great Wall—constituted the “sacred geographical limits of the Indian nation.” B. K. Sarkar, in his stimulating work *Chinese Religion through Hindu Eyes*, wrote of the “Indianization of Confucianism” and the “Indianization of China” from the seventh to the tenth centuries.<sup>9</sup> Liang Jizhao told Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, in the 1920s: “India and China are like twin brothers. Before most of the civilised races became active, we two brothers had already begun to study the great problems which concern the whole of mankind ... India was ahead of us and we, the little brother, followed behind.”<sup>10</sup> The Chinese image of India was not just as a Buddhist paradise (*xi tian*) but also as a source of scientific learning.<sup>11</sup> In the 1930s, Dr. Hu Shih, the leader of the Chinese intellectual renaissance, said: “When China was brought face to face with India, China was overwhelmed, dazzled, and dumbfounded by the vast output of the religious zeal and genius of the Indian nation. China acknowledged its defeat and was completely conquered.”<sup>12</sup> On the whole, in the realm of ideas, the impact of India on China has been much greater than vice versa.

The texture of the Chinese-Indian relationship underwent a major transformation between the seventh and the fifteenth centuries. The religious exchanges of the first millennium (the years 0 to 1000) gave way to mostly commercial exchanges

in the first half of the second millennium (1100 to 1500). As historian Tansen Sen points out: “While in the first millennium the sacred Buddhist sites in India were the pivot of Sino-Indian interactions, the lucrative markets of China and the expanding intercontinental commerce emerged as the main stimuli for the bilateral relations since the early eleventh century. In other words, the relations between India and China were realigned from Buddhist-dominated to trade-centered exchanges.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, whereas the process of Buddhist religious-cultural interaction between China and India occurred overland in the first millennium, “communications between the two during the Song-Yuan-early Ming period took place primarily through the maritime routes” in the second millennium.<sup>14</sup> Apparently, the closure of the silk route (following the wave of Islamic invasions throughout Central Asia) and of the overland route via Tibet (by a powerful and expansionist Tibetan kingdom) to India and the West stimulated China’s maritime trade and commerce with India through seaborne trade. In addition, Christopher Wake identifies three other factors that contributed to significant growth in overseas maritime trade:

- The southward shift in the demographic and economic centre of gravity of China underway at the beginning of the second millennium;
- the Song dynasty’s decision to increase government revenue through import duties; and
- significant advances made in shipbuilding technology.<sup>15</sup>

A combination of these geopolitical,

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technological, and economic developments saw Chinese ships sailing all the way to Indian ports on the Malabar coast by the end of the eleventh century. It was at the ports of Kolam (Quilon), Cochin, Calicut, and Coromandel, which emerged as major transit points in the Indian Ocean region, that goods from Africa, Arabia, and other places were transferred onto Chinese vessels for shipment to Quanzhou.<sup>16</sup> The second millennium also saw India faced with internal disunity, internecine warfare, and repeated Islamic invasions. The ancient Indic civilisation on the subcontinent lay in ruins.<sup>17</sup> China, in sharp contrast, emerged as a stronger military, political, and economic power under the Song, Mongol (Yuan), Ming, and Manchu (Qing) rulers.

The Chinese and Indian civilisations had also existed in close juxtaposition in Southeast Asia, greatly modifying the indigenous cultures of the region. These two great strains of culture flowed side by side and intermingled in many areas, but did not fuse in any major way. In fact, they represented two distinct attitudes of mind and conflicting worldviews and exerted very little influence on one another. One extended in the direction of the material and practical, the other in the direction of the philosophical and intangible. To the Chinese mind, “this-worldly,” practical, materialistic, and pragmatic—the commonsense of Confucius still had a far greater appeal than the metaphysical “other-worldliness” of Buddhism. The influence of the former is evident in Vietnam, which came under Sinic cultural influence, whereas the latter is more dominant in Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, which still trace

their Buddhist-Hindu religious roots directly to the Indic civilisation.

Many scholars have long argued that neither Han nor Hindu rulers were territorially expansionist. Both seemingly lacked “martial” imperialist instincts. Both China and India were ravaged by foreign nomadic tribes that established “foreign” dynasties. In China’s case, most threats to Chinese security certainly originated from the interior. Some China-watchers contend that “China’s real cultural achievements historically had little to do with militarism and imperialism and that Chinese civilisation reached its qualitative peaks during the relatively peaceful and culture-oriented (albeit small) Song and Ming Chinas.” They claim that the Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties and Nationalist China represented the real China, unencumbered as they were by the martial spirit or messianic zeal of the Mongols, Manchus (Qing), and Communists.<sup>18</sup> This line of argument maintains that it was primarily non-Han dynasties—the Mongols and the Manchus—who conquered China and expanded traditional China’s territories into central, south, southeast, and northeast Asia. Until the Chinese and Russian Empires met in Central Asia in the nineteenth century and China created the province of Xinjiang (New Territories), China could not subdue the nomadic armies on the Central Asian steppe. As Alastair Johnston pointed out: “So persistent was the nomadic threat that during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) a strategic culture developed regarding relations with the Mongols, in which Beijing eschewed all thought of diplomacy and limited victories, seeking total annihilation of its nomadic adversaries.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, it was

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Han contact with martial Mongols that brought about the culture of violence and martial spirit and whetted the Chinese appetite for territorial expansion. Likewise, Indian historians stress that most of their expansion in their extended neighbourhood (whether in Central Asia or Southeast Asia) was mostly in the mercantile, cultural, and religious realms and was by and large peaceful.<sup>20</sup> They point out that Hindu India's empire building—with the exception of southern India's Chola dynasty, the Srivijaya Kingdom on the Malay peninsula, and the Kamboja empire—was undertaken mostly by Moghuls from Central Asia and the British from Europe.<sup>21</sup>

Many historians, however, criticise the view that “empire building in both China and India was undertaken mostly by foreign rulers” as historically and factually inaccurate. Based on new archaeological research and historical sources, Nicola Di Cosmo's *Ancient China and its Enemies* questions the traditional Sino-centric interpretation of Chinese history as a contest between barbarous “martial” north (Hsiung-nu nomads) and the civilised south (Shang and Chou China).<sup>22</sup> Recent scholarship has shown that the Han dynasty clearly had an expansionist agenda when dealing with the Central and Inner Asians and the same was true with the Tang dynasty, not only in Central Asia but also in Tibet and Korea.<sup>23</sup> Even Nationalist China under Chiang Kai-shek was plenty martial, Chiang himself saying he saw fascism as a model for China. He did not have the opportunity to be expansionist because the Japanese had him on the defensive.<sup>24</sup> The expansion of Han Chinese rule to Manchuria,

Mongolia, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Yunnan over the last 2,000 years has been largely achieved through conquest, absorption, assimilation, and large-scale migration.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, major territorial expansion in Southwest Asia, Kashmir, and Central Asia was undertaken during the reigns of Emperors Ashoka and Kanishka in India. At its greatest extent, the Mauryan Empire (322–185 BCE) stretched to the north along the natural boundaries of the Himalayas and to the east stretching into what is now Assam. From the tenth through the thirteenth centuries, several of the Pallava and Chola kings assembled large navies and armies to overthrow neighbouring kingdoms and to undertake punitive attacks on the states in the Bay of Bengal region. They also took to the sea to conquer parts of what are now Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Indonesia. George Tanham observes: “In what was really a battle over the trade between China and India and Europe, the Cholas were quite successful in both naval and land engagements and briefly ruled [dominated] portions of Southeast Asia.”<sup>26</sup> Suffice it to say, nearly all kingdoms and empires behaved in a more or less expansionist manner whenever strength allowed and an opportunity arose.

No people are more history-conscious than the Chinese. The Chinese leadership nowadays pays rich tribute to the outward-looking policies of the Ming dynasty during the fifteenth century when Admiral Zheng He's (also spelt as Cheng Ho) voyages of exploration in 1405–1433 led to the exchange of knowledge and goods as far afield as the east coast of Africa, thereby suggesting that today's commercial engagement is in the same

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spirit of trade and openness, and that China's extension of its maritime power into Southeast and South Asia and the Indian Ocean region should not be feared or resisted. A growing body of evidence, however, questions the portrayal of Admiral Zheng He's seven voyages to Southeast Asia, India, Arabia, and Africa as benign missions of peace and friendship.<sup>27</sup> Many scholars argue that Zheng He's expeditions 600 years ago, which followed lesser ones by the Mongol Yuan dynasty, began a southward Chinese expansion that was driven as much by commercial as political hegemony motives.<sup>28</sup> This southward expansion, which paralleled China's territorial expansion in the north and west, had huge consequences not only for the geopolitics of the region but also for its demographics, the region having hitherto been more subject to Indian than Chinese cultural influence.

On land this included the annexation of Yunnan, a partially successful attempt to control Vietnam and interference in the affairs of Burma. By sea it took the form of expeditions to achieve "regime change" among the small political entities of Southeast Asia, including detaching the trading states of Sumatra from allegiance to the Java-based Majapahit empire. The military forces of Zheng He and others overthrew rulers as far away as Sri Lanka who would not submit to Ming hegemony, installing puppets in their place ... Ming policy expanded China's geographical and tributary claims. These are found in its claims to the whole of the South China Sea, used to justify its seizure of islands from Vietnam, and Ming-era assumptions of the superiority of Chinese civilization over its Malay and Indian counterparts.<sup>29</sup>

Admiral Zheng He's naval expeditions to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean in the fifteenth century not only demonstrated the might of the Chinese empire but also ensured Chinese imperial domination of the trade routes linking the Middle East and East Asia. The Yuan and Ming rulers forced many Southeast Asian kingdoms to pay tribute to China's emperors as a precondition for preferential trade treatment, thereby achieving a *Pax Sinica* throughout the known world. Southeast Asian states that regularly sent tributes included Annam (North Vietnam), Siam (Thailand), Sulu (South Philippines), Burma, and Laos. Sinologist Geoff Wade argues that these military missions had strategic aims, and thus amounted to "what might be called maritime proto-colonialism: that is, they were engaged in that early form of maritime colonialism by which a dominant maritime power took control (either through force or the threat thereof) of the main port-polities along the major East-West maritime trade network, as well as the seas between, thereby gaining economic and political benefits."<sup>30</sup> Given this historical backdrop, it is not surprising that China's re-emergence as a great power is causing regional unease and discomfort in East Asia where the memories of the tributary state system or "the Middle Kingdom syndrome" have not completely dimmed.

Maritime Asia (Southern China, Annam, Srivijaya, Sumatra, Siam, and Southern India) in the first half of the second millennium was bound by economic interdependence and seaborne trade and saw the establishment of preferential trade-cum-tributary arrangements and trading diasporas at major ports in Southeast and South Asia. Despite

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trade and tributary arrangements, this region was neither peaceful nor conflict-free. For example, despite strong religious and cultural ties, the desire to control lucrative maritime trade between China and the Indian Ocean region is said to have caused the Cholas to launch punitive raids on the Srivijayan ports on the Malay peninsula.<sup>31</sup> Does the conduct of Ming rulers' maritime strategy or the linkage of tribute with trade have any bearing upon the state of China-Southeast Asia and China-India relations in the third millennium? The Ming voyages are now an inextricable part of Chinese nationalist lore—and its populist claim to the Indian Ocean. Imperial hubris or nostalgia for a return to the past can have unpredictable consequences. As noted earlier, trade and maritime exchanges between China and the kingdoms along the southern Indian coast saw dramatic growth in the first half of the second millennium. While promoting trade and maritime linkages, the Yuan and Ming court officials also became involved in dispute resolution involving feuding kingdoms in Calicut, Cochin, and Bengal. Even the mighty kingdom of Vijayanagar in southern India sent an embassy to China in 1374 to serve as a warning to the Tughluq Sultanate of Delhi against any further Muslim intrusions into the Hindu South. (This was not the first time an Indian ruler had sent an embassy to China to seek support. The Indian diplomatic mission of 720 specifically mentioned the threat from the Tibetans and Muslim Arabs as the main reason for seeking help from the Tang Court. Apparently, this was so because northern India had fallen to the Muslim invaders. In contrast, China's Tang dynasty had successfully defeated and repulsed the Islamic armies.) Tansen

Sen's study on Chinese maritime networks to southern Asia outlines the politico-strategic nature of China-India interactions during the first half of the second millennium:

For the Ming court, the expeditions of Zheng He, the tributary missions that ensued, the granting of titles to or writing imperial proclamations for the local rulers, and the involvement in the political disputes, all formed an integral part of its ideology to underscore the leadership of the Ming emperor in the known world. Moreover, the Ming court through these actions wanted to demonstrate its supremacy over previous Chinese dynasties in regard to controlling and civilizing foreign states. The activities of the Ming emissaries in the Indian subcontinent suggest that the region was considered an integral part of the "Great Unified [Empire]" doctrine ... The Yuan court, under Qubilai Khan, explored the Indian coast to establish tributary, commercial, and strategic relationship as part of his imperialistic endeavor. The early Ming rulers, on the other hand, tried to use their superior naval force to bring the Indian kingdoms within the folds of the rhetorical Chinese world order.<sup>32</sup>

In short, the period between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries in the second millennium witnessed a major transformation in India's relations with China. The predominantly commercial exchanges of the second millennium brought about a shift in Chinese perceptions of India, which were markedly different from Chinese views of India in the first millennium when religion and culture ruled the roost. Direct trade between China's Quanzhou and India's west coast ceased sometime around the middle of the fifteenth century

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due to a shift in regional trade patterns and internal political upheavals. It may not be an oversimplification to argue that if the first millennium was the age of *Pax Indica*, the second millennium was the age of *Pax Sinica*. In the first millennium (during the years 0 to 1000), India was the world's pre-eminent economic power, closely followed by China. In the first half of the second millennium (1100 to 1500), China overtook India as the world's largest economy, relegating India to second place. This is corroborated in economic historian Angus Maddison's pioneering study, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective*, which shows that India was the world's largest economy with a 32.9 percent share of the worldwide GDP in the first century and 28.9 percent in the eleventh century. During the years 1500–1600 as well, India was second only to China in terms of world GDP share and remained among the top until as late as the seventeenth century.<sup>33</sup> Even as recently as 1820, China and India accounted for 49 percent of the world economy.

Until the fifteenth century, China and India were still far ahead of Europe in almost all aspects of life, and the flow of manufactured goods and technological know-how was mostly from East to West. Before the age of European colonisation, China accounted for about 33 percent of the world's manufactured goods and India for about 25 percent. China under the Song (960–1267) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties was the world's greatest power. Under the Guptas (320–950 CE) and Moghuls (1526–1857), India's economic, military, and cultural prowess was the object of envy. Then in a complete reversal of fortune, the

mighty Asian civilisations suddenly declined and disintegrated, and were eventually conquered by European powers. While India's experience of threats from European maritime powers occurred in the seventeenth century, China's came only in the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century, by increasing its hold over India, the British East India Company managed to squeeze most of its European rivals out of the trade with China. Initially, the company's chief line of trade was selling raw cotton from India and importing silk from China. In the early nineteenth century, it began to engage in opium smuggling in a big way, growing the opium in India and selling it in China, culminating in the two Anglo-Chinese Opium Wars in 1840 and 1857, which broke the back of the Manchu China.<sup>34</sup> In the last three centuries of the second millennium, first India and then China were reduced to mere economic appendages of the industrialised West. After a hiatus of nearly 300 years, both are once again on their growth trajectories, and the economic contest between China and India has resumed once again in the third millennium.

### **Hierarchy: Tribute and the Doctrine of *Mandala* (“Concentric Circles”)**

Whereas modern nation-states need clearly *defined* and *demarkated boundaries*, pre-modern states, empires and kingdoms existed within *temporary* and *undefined frontiers*. Just as in any traditional hierarchical society, rulers and the ruled have assigned places; in international society, the big and powerful and small and weak have their assigned places. Imperial China had regulated its relations with other states by a tribute system,

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under which foreign rulers were treated like vassals of the emperor. When China was weak, tribute ceased; when strong, it was resumed. A tributary relationship did not necessarily imply a Chinese military presence or direct administrative control. Strategically, the tributary system was essentially a defensive measure insofar as it created a zone of buffer states on the empire's periphery. It also helped identify potential allies in the event of a conflict against common adversaries. Economically, it was profitable because the tribute bearer would invariably receive from the benevolent emperor gifts worth more than the tribute given to the emperor. The Song Court's decision to link maritime trade to the tributary system was one of the key reasons for the increased competition among foreign traders who outdid each other in paying obeisance to China's rulers in order to win preferential trade concessions.<sup>35</sup> The skilful use of economic carrots in return for an acceptance of suzerain or subordinate status seems to be at work today in China's liberal trade arrangements with countries that strictly abide by the "One China" policy and toe Beijing's line on global issues.

The tributary system was based on power asymmetry or an institutionalised inequality in relations between the Middle Kingdom and the tributaries, which served to reinforce the belief in the superiority of Chinese civilisation amongst its neighbours. This power asymmetry was intrinsic to the stability of the Sino-centric tributary system for many centuries before the arrival of more advanced European powers in Asia.<sup>36</sup> Other empires in history have employed similar measures. While the Chinese nationalist view recollects the

Chinese sphere of influence in territories from the Russian far east across Southeast Asia and the Tibetan plateau into the Himalayas, the Indian nationalist worldview counts among India's tributaries peoples and states variously influenced by the Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions and languages (Pali and Sanskrit) stretching from Afghanistan to Indonesia.<sup>37</sup> This hierarchical way of conceptualising foreign relations dominated Asian people's thinking at least until the late nineteenth century. So the Westphalian state system based on the concept of legal equality or state sovereignty distinguished itself not only from the old feudal system in Europe, but also from other forms of suzerainty that existed at that time in Asia—in China, India, and the Arab Islamic world.

The traditional Chinese concept of international relations was also based upon concentric circles from the imperial capital outwards through variously dependent states to the barbarians, which stands in sharp contrast to the theory of equal sovereign states developed by the West.<sup>38</sup> As Rafe de Crespigny notes: "The relationships may be described in an intimate style, as father and mother, elder and younger brother, or even lips and teeth, but there is a hierarchy, and the relationship may be confirmed by force. In this respect, natural Chinese interest in East and Southeast Asia is influenced not only by a sense of good order but also by expectations of control and guidance."<sup>39</sup> This theory of international relations based on concentric circles resembles the concept of *Mandala* as outlined in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* more than 2,000 years ago. Inter-state relations in Ancient India were of the most Machiavellian

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character. Much as in Imperial China, the rightful fruits of victory in ancient India were tribute, homage, and subservience, but not annexation. The basic concept which governed the relations of one king with another was the doctrine of the “circles” (*Mandala*), which postulated that a king’s neighbour is his natural enemy, while the king beyond his neighbour is his natural ally. As noted Indologist A. L. Basham observed: “The working of this principle can be seen throughout the history of Hindu India in the temporary alliances of two kingdoms to accomplish the encirclement and destruction of the kingdoms between them.”<sup>40</sup> The Chinese dynasties had followed a similar policy of encircling and “attacking nearby neighbour and maintaining friendly relations with more distant kingdoms” (*yuan jiao jin gong*).

### **The Concept of Centrality: “The Middle Kingdom Syndrome”**

Before the nineteenth century, “China can reasonably be considered to have been ‘more equal’ than the other countries of East Asia; in South Asia, the same applied to India under the Moghuls” (and much earlier, under the Guptas and Mauryas).<sup>41</sup> When Chinese and Indian elites speak of restoring their country’s rightful place in the world, they give expression to a concept of “centrality” in Asia and the wider world. This concept reflects their perception that as the foundation of regional cultural patterns, their rightful place is at the apex of world hierarchy. The notion of Chinese supremacy is illustrated by the manner in which alien rulers once in power, including the Mongols and the Manchus, invariably

adopted Confucian culture and institutions.<sup>42</sup> Both China and India, wrote Austin Coates, “share the same concept of their own centrality.”<sup>43</sup> Apparently, the diffusion of Chinese culture in East Asia and Indian religions and culture throughout Asia supports their perceptions of “centrality”. Since there was not much interaction between the two Asian centres of civilisations and power despite their proximity, each had developed, by and large, in its own isolation, with its own sphere of influence and worldview regarding its place in the wider world. Historically and as a civilisation, China in eastern Asia and India in southern Asia enjoyed supremacy, thereby reinforcing their notion of “centrality.” Coates further notes that:

“The concept of centrality is politically—in the widest sense of that word—the most fundamentally important fact about these two countries, since it is the basis of their entire outlook on life, toward themselves, toward their neighbors, toward other lands, toward the world, and toward the universe. *Without understanding and taking account of the concept of centrality, no harmonious and profitable economic and political relations with these two countries are possible....* Chinese and Indians, individually and en masse, think and speak from a position of absolute centrality.... Viewing the world and all human activity from this standpoint of centrality inevitably brings with it a certain sense of superiority.... *Where the Indian centrality is of the mind, the Chinese centrality is material and terrestrial*, personified in the Chinese race, and supremely embodied in former times by kings, later by emperors.... The truth is that each centrality has known of the other’s

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existence for considerably more than two thousand years. Yet neither has ever realized that the other is a centrality similar to itself, with the same comprehensive, changeless, and absolute view of itself, the world, and the universe.... *The concept of centrality is itself responsible for the blindness China and India exhibit in regard to each other's nature.* The concept is enormous and noble, it is the roots and trunk of a great tree of civilization. Yet in a certain sense, it can be compared with pride, which similarly contains an unusual measure of blindness.... Whenever the concept is damaged, one may expect reactions similar to those of a man of excessive pride when the myth of his cleverness or power is exploded.”<sup>44</sup>

Whenever China has been ascendant in its history, its emperors as well as discreetly assenting rulers of neighbouring small states have assumed the country to be a kind of “universal” centre. The small-state rulers were expected to and did offer tribute and homage. This notion of centrality, however, which lies at the heart of the concept of “Middle Kingdom” (*Zhong guo*) in China, was “damaged” severely as it came in contact with other non-Chinese civilisations. As Martin Jacques notes: “China lives in and with its past to such an extent that it is tormented by its failure during the late twentieth century to stay at the top of the international system.”<sup>45</sup> This largely explains the CCP’s obsession with “catching up with the West” or “leapfrogging” to emerge as Number One Power in the world (*Zhongguo di yi*) so as to restore China to its lost grandeur. Anyone who has lived in China and reads Chinese language sources is well aware of this great patriotic national obsession.<sup>46</sup> Its roots go back to the late nineteenth

century “Self-Strengthening Movement” (*ziligengshen*), to Mao’s “Great Leap Forward” in the late 1950s (which sought to displace Britain as the world’s largest steel producer but ended in a disastrous famine that took millions of lives), and to Deng Xiaoping’s “Four Modernisations” strategy outlined in 1978 (which finally succeeded in beating the West at its own game). As in the past, China’s re-emergence as the fulcrum of the world economy in the twenty-first century is meant to restore its traditional supremacy in the world.

A strong and powerful Imperial China, much like Czarist Russia, became expansionist in Inner Asia as an opportunity arose and strength allowed. This gradual westward expansion over the centuries extended Imperial China’s control over Tibet and parts of Central Asia (now Xinjiang). Modern China is, in fact, an “empire-state” masquerading as a nation-state. The People’s Republic of China’s present geographical limits reflects the frontiers established during the spectacular episode of eighteenth-century Qing (Manchu) expansionism, which were then hardened into fixed national boundaries (except outer Mongolia) following the imposition of the Westphalian nation-state system over Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership consciously conducts itself as the heir to China’s imperial legacy, often employing the symbolism and rhetoric of empire. From primary school textbooks to television historical dramas, the state-controlled information system has force-fed generations of Chinese on a diet of nationalist bluster and imperial China’s grandeur. The writing and rewriting of history from a nationalistic perspective to promote

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national unity and regime legitimacy has been accorded the highest priority by China's rulers, both Nationalists and Communists. The Chinese are firm believers in the notion that those who have mastered the past control their present and chart their own futures along with those of others. In its diplomacy as well, Beijing places a very high value on "the history card" (often a revisionist interpretation of history) for achieving its foreign policy objectives, especially to extract territorial and diplomatic concessions. As Martin Jacques puts it: "Imperial Sinocentrism shapes and underpins modern Chinese nationalism."<sup>47</sup>

It was only as a result of the extension of Imperial China's borders to Tibet and Xinjiang (a.k.a. Eastern Turkestan) that the modern nation-states of China and India came in close physical contact. Unlike Imperial China, however, India never developed a pro-active defence of its strategic frontiers. A case in point is the building of the 1,500 mile- long Great Wall by successive Chinese dynasties to keep out nomadic invaders from the north. Despite the fact that nearly all of India's invaders—Alexander of Macedonia, the Scythians, Mohammed of Ghori, Mahmud of Gaznavi, Tamurlane, Nadir Shah, Babur the Moghul—came down the same Khyber and Bolan mountain passes to loot, rape, and pillage every few years or so, no attempt was made to erect impenetrable defences (i.e., a Great Wall of India). Therein lay a key difference between the strategic cultures of China and India: the former's preference for clearly defined and protected hard borders versus the latter's acceptance of undefined and unprotected, soft frontiers.

In contrast with China, India also lacked central

authority and did not engage in the physical subjugation of neighbouring countries. As China moved south, some races vanished altogether, while others were subjected to a process of absorption and assimilation into the broader Chinese identity. As John Garver observes, "China's history has seen a process of gradual expansion in which more numerous, richer, and better-organised Han settlers have assimilated lesser non-Han peoples."<sup>48</sup> This process of expansion, assimilation, and pacification mainly via demographic penetration of nearby lands and buffer states accelerated in Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet during the twentieth century. Today the homelands of China's old conquerors, the Mongols and Manchus—"the barbarians from the north"—are both overwhelmingly Han. This Sinification process is now reportedly underway in northern Burma, Laos, Central Asia, and the Russian Far East. In India, on the other hand, no deliberate attempt could be made to change the demographic balance either in Kashmir or the northeastern states. Coates offers a philosophical explanation: "The Indian centrality is of the mind, [whereas] the Chinese centrality is material and terrestrial." The concept of India as a political entity was as hazy as ideas of what lay beyond its borders. India's capitulation to invaders has historically been ascribed to the fractious nature of its polity. That tradition holds true of India today. Unlike the Chinese, Indians are not known for thinking and acting strategically.<sup>49</sup> India's territorial boundaries shrank following the 1947 partition that broke up the civilisational unity of the subcontinent going back 2,000 years to the first Mauryan Empire. Soon thereafter, the occupation of Tibet in 1950 allowed

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China to extend its reach and influence into a region where it had, in terms of culture and civilisation, previously exercised little or no influence in the past. Whereas India is non-status-quoist in terms of *status*, power and influence, China remains non-status-quoist in terms of *territory*, power and influence. It is well known that the idea of national sovereignty goes back to the sixteenth century Europe. However, the idea of maritime sovereignty is largely a mid-twentieth century American concoction that has now been seized upon by China and others to extend their maritime frontiers in the South China Sea. Beijing reportedly claims around 80 percent of the South China Sea as its “historic waters” and has now elevated it to “core interests” (along with Taiwan and Tibet).<sup>50</sup> The continued reinterpretation of history to advance contemporary political, territorial, and maritime claims coupled with the CCP’s ability to turn “nationalistic eruptions” on and off like a tap during moments of tension with the United States, Japan, India, and Vietnam makes it difficult for Beijing to reassure its neighbours that China’s peaceful rise does not require balancing or hedging strategies.

It was the task of conversion of the *undefined frontiers of ancient civilisations* into clearly *defined and demarcated boundaries of modern nation-states* that brought about the armed clashes in the late 1950s. China-India relations have been tense ever since a border dispute led to a full-scale war in 1962 and armed skirmishes in 1967 and 1987. Several rounds of talks held over more than a quarter of a century (since 1981) have failed to resolve the disputed claims. An unsettled border provides China the strategic leverage to keep India uncertain about its intentions and nervous about

its capabilities, while exposing India’s vulnerabilities and weaknesses and ensuring New Delhi’s “good behaviour” on issues of vital concern to China. More importantly, unless and until Beijing succeeds in totally pacifying and Sinicizing Tibet as it has Inner Mongolia, China is unlikely to give up the “bargaining chip” that an unsettled boundary vis-à-vis India provides it with.

Chinese strategic thinkers perceive the emerging multipolar world similar to that of the Warring States era (475–221 BC), which was characterised by power rivalries, conflicts, shifting alliances, and betrayals, with some states competing to become a hegemon and others forming alliances to prevent any state from attaining that dominant status. This outlook necessitates distrust of strong, powerful neighbours (e.g., India) and preference for small, weak, and subordinate or client states. John Garver in his *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* reaches the same conclusion:

China’s long-term security interests and the long-term growth of Chinese prominence in Asia would be best served by having more, smaller states rather than one larger state on China’s southern border. Thus, Chinese policy has sought to prevent the possibility of Indian domination or unification of the South Asian region. An Indian-led South Asian bloc would be far more dangerous (because it would be more powerful) if it pursued policies antithetical to Chinese interests.<sup>51</sup>

Historically, China sits as the equal of no one. The Middle Kingdom does not *see* others as equal.<sup>52</sup> The Chinese refer to their nation as “*Tian-xia*,” or “all-under-heaven,” implying a belief in cultural superiority based on virtue (*de*).<sup>53</sup> It

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reinforces belief in China's greatness and supposedly unique place in international relations. To imply equality with China is to offend the Chinese sense of what is "right." During a speech in the Parliament on November 25, 1959, India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru noted: "From fairly early in history, they [Chinese] have had a sense of greatness. They call themselves the 'Middle Kingdom,' and it seemed natural to them that other countries should pay tribute to them. Their thinking was that the rest of the world occupied a lower grade. That has made it difficult for us to understand the working of their mind, and what is more to the point, for them to understand the working of our mind."<sup>54</sup>

Classic Chinese statecraft dictates that there is no such thing as friendly foreign powers. "All states are either hostile or subordinate."<sup>55</sup> Subordinate states (North Korea, Burma, Cambodia, Pakistan) are allies and dependents who need to be protected and provided with economic, diplomatic, and military support, whereas hostile states, who either do not kowtow to the Celestial Emperor or have close military ties with foreign powers (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, India, and Vietnam), are enemies who need to be subdued by involving them in troublesome embroilments and/or by "teaching them a lesson." Whether Imperial, Nationalist or Communist, China has long sought either to install buffer states or to cultivate friendly, and preferably pliant, regimes or tributary states along its periphery. As Austin Coates states:

The fact is that since 1949 [Beijing] has dictated a border policy identical with that which has been pursued at all times in the imperial past, whenever the country was in an internally strong

position.... Actually, it is a very old story. The aim of Chinese imperial policy (as of Communist policy) was that neighbour states must be respectful, obedient, and in areas immediately adjacent to the Chinese lands, preferably impotent [and] sufficiently weak.<sup>56</sup>

Beijing's preference for friendly, pliant regimes all along the maritime chokepoints in the Indian Ocean sea lanes is not much different from the Ming Court's past attempts to dominate the maritime lanes by changing political regimes at various places (in Malacca, Sumatra, and Sri Lanka) so as to facilitate free trade and maritime commerce. Old attitudes remain well-entrenched. China's future power projection capabilities are likely to be influenced by ancient Chinese statecraft, in particular, the strategic tradition of punishing those who fail to pay tribute and show respect and deference to the Middle Kingdom. Apparently, politically subservient and compliant regimes on its borders add to Beijing's sense of security because "most Chinese strategists believe that China is more secure if other states are weaker and thus less secure."<sup>57</sup> A survey conducted in China in 2005 revealed that most interviewees thought that "a stronger China will try to restore its traditional vassal system." Once China emerges as an "unrivalled regional power and a major global actor, it will use its enhanced power to grant assistance and protection to 'the faithful countries,' in return for their alliance, obedience and inevitable submission and compliance."<sup>58</sup> It is true that all great powers (democratic or authoritarian) tend to behave in a similar hegemonic fashion once they reach the pinnacle of power. Nonetheless, China has a long historical track record of this behaviour.

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Two sinologists have succinctly summed up Chinese attitudes toward interstate relations, war, and strategy, based as they are on Chinese strategic tradition:

“In Chinese eyes, the values of this cultural framework describe Chinese identity and reflect a self-perception of cultural superiority over China’s lesser neighbours. The Chinese not only want to restore China’s dominant role at the centre of Asia, but seek to establish their country as one of the major poles—second to none—in a multipolar world.... This conceptualisation of interstate relations based upon a hierarchical system with China at the top is ingrained in their cultural worldview. *Today, this sense of hierarchy is expressed in notions of comprehensive national power based on culture, economics and organisational power and military power...* The Chinese generally employ their military for limited purposes, usually to strengthen the credibility of Chinese power, shore up their status as the natural leader of Asia, test their opponent’s will and intentions opportunistically, or teach a political lesson. Forces are employed at a time and place of Beijing’s choosing, assuring surprise and overwhelming force. Moreover, *this strategy also reinforces the point that China’s interests cannot be ignored, and emphasises that China’s role in regional issues must be recognised as essential to their resolution. In this way, China assumes a dominant role in relation to its neighbours.... Although abjuring ‘hegemonic’ ambitions, Beijing’s growing power in the region raises fears among its neighbours that it will inevitably pursue hegemonic ambitions at their expense.*”<sup>59</sup>

Having said that, it is worth noting here that the much-talked-about “Middle Kingdom syndrome” is not essentially Sino-centric or unique to China alone. All great centers of civilization and great powers have at times displayed elements of the Middle Kingdom: that is, a belief in universalism, a civilising mission, and a sense of superiority. Even in the modern world, there is an element of the Middle Kingdom in the attitude of the United States. This was true of Britain in the age of *Pax Britannica*. Before the age of the national territorial state and international law, non-egalitarian inter-state relations were not uncommon. As one observer points out: “The world order of Rome, Christendom, India, and the various Islamic empires of West Asia all shared unequal interstate relations.... Even in the most modern period of international law, the categories of less than sovereign states and vassal states have been recognised.”<sup>60</sup>

Fundamentally, the key point is that historically and civilisationally, while China was the “Middle Kingdom” of eastern Asia, India sees itself as the “Middle Kingdom” of southern Asia. Much like the Chinese, the Indians’ view of society as a hierarchy serves as a basis for their view of the world. India’s elite sees “a hierarchical layering of nations according to wealth and power,” and believes that “India should be in the top ranks of the world hierarchy—a Brahmin idea of the world.”<sup>61</sup> Indian leaders since independence have believed that India was once a world power and therefore it *should* be the preeminent power in the South Asian/Indian Ocean region even though it lacks a clear strategy, determination, and many of the resources needed to achieve that objective in the future.

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Furthermore, it is in China's and India's dealings in their immediate neighbourhoods that the patterns and perceptions of the past appear most obvious, and provide contradictions and conflicts for the present and future. Both China and India have sought to establish a sort of Monroe Doctrine in their regions with mixed degrees of success. Both claim that their attitude toward their neighbours is essentially benevolent while making it clear that they must not make policies or take actions, or allow other nations to take measures in their countries that would impinge on, respectively, Chinese or Indian interests and security. If they do so, China and India are willing to apply pressure in one fashion or another to bring these neighbouring states into line.<sup>62</sup> Both are, however, unable to reassert their traditional suzerainty over their smaller neighbours in East and South Asia respectively, as any attempt to do so encounters resistance from regional and extra-regional powers.

### **Geopolitical Shifts**

Clearly, China and India are as much "civilisation-states" as pre-modern "empire-states" and modern "nation-states." Their strategic cultures require both to regain the power and status their leaders consider appropriate to their countries' size, population, geographic position, and historical heritage. Their common desire to regain lost greatness has created grandiose ambitions, but geopolitical shifts, historical patterns, and contrasting perceptions have brought those ambitions into conflict. More importantly, the historical reference points for nationalist narratives in both capitals are different. The Indian nationalist narrative harks back to "the golden age" in the

first millennium—between the second and eighth centuries—when religious, linguistic, and other cultural influences emanating from the subcontinent had fostered a wide sphere of influence that "extended from the Himalayan Mountains in the north to the seas in the south, into Southeast Asia on the east, to Persia in the West, and into Central Asia in the northwest."<sup>63</sup> This was the period when "India found itself occupying a unique place in the Chinese world order: a foreign kingdom that was culturally and spiritually revered as equal to the Chinese civilisation."<sup>64</sup> In contrast, is the modern Chinese nationalist narrative, wherein China's traditional tributary system encompassed large parts of Inner and Central Asia, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and parts of South Asia (Nepal, Kashmir, Bhutan, Sikkim, Bengal, and Burma) prior to "the century of humiliation." In Chinese dynastic histories, "India is presented as one of many far-away regions that occasionally sent tribute missions to China and, thereby, acknowledged her status as a vassal state."<sup>65</sup> Stated simply, while India's elite looks back in history to the first millennium, the mandarins in Beijing have their country's superior position in the second millennium on their minds when they deal with India.

Both countries are focusing on increasing comprehensive national strength on a solid economic-technological base. The domestic political and economic developmental processes of India and China have tended to reinforce the competitive aspects of their relationship. Both suffer from a siege mentality borne out of their elites' acute consciousness of the fissiparous tendencies that make their countries' present political unity so fragile. To a considerable extent,

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this drive explains China's and India's national security policies and their competitive or conflictual relations with each other. Since India is one of the oldest civilisations and former world power, the Indian elite believes their country has as much, if not more, right to great power status as China. Since the days of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India has entertained hopes of joint Sino-Indian leadership of Asia as a counter to Western influence, but the Chinese have shown no enthusiasm for sharing leadership of Asia with anyone, least of all India. For the main objective of China's Asia policy is to prevent the rise of a rival to challenge its status as the Asia-Pacific's sole "Middle Kingdom." As an old Chinese saying goes, "one mountain cannot accommodate two tigers." Checkmated in East Asia by three great powers—Russia, Japan, and the United States—Beijing has long seen South and Southeast Asia as its sphere of influence. Recognising that strategic rival India has the size, might, numbers, and, above all, the intention to match China, Beijing has long followed a "*hexiao, gongda*" policy in southern Asia: "supporting and uniting with small (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) to fight the big (India)." The "strategic space" in which India traditionally operated has become increasingly constricted due to Beijing's forays into Burma and the Indian Ocean region since the 1990s. From New Delhi's perspective, much of Beijing's penetration deep into the South Asian region in the second half of the twentieth century has been primarily at India's expense—a bitter pill to swallow as ancient India did not play second fiddle to China historically and civilisationally. This is one of the root causes of volatility and strain in the relationship.

If the past is a guide to the future, one can argue that the China-India rivalry has its roots in the desire of each for the restoration of its historic status and influence (which prevailed before the arrival of European powers in Asia) and China's determination (albeit, for reasons mostly of India's own making) to deny India a role on the world stage commensurate with its size, population, military capability, economic potential, and civilisational attributes.<sup>66</sup> When Indian observer Rakshat Puri lamented in the late 1990s the fact that a sound "appreciation, and knowledge about each other's histories, traditions and cultures do not at present seem to exist in the policy-making circles of either the Chinese or the Indians,"<sup>67</sup> he was, in fact, echoing Austin Coates' view that "neither has ever realised that the other is a centrality similar to itself.... The concept of centrality is itself responsible for the blindness China and India exhibit in regard to each other's nature." Puri's view that "real peace between China and India can come only when relations between them are founded on equality," laudable as it is, may however be unrealistic. The Chinese have a deeply hierarchical view of the world and insist that India's growth must be "conducive to the equilibrium of the current international order" (translation: India must not equal or surpass China).<sup>68</sup>

There have been numerous occasions in history when China and India were simultaneously weak; there have been occasional moments of simultaneous cultural blossoming. But for more than half a millennium, Asia has not seen the two giants economically and militarily powerful and pursuing a policy of expansion at the same time. As Austin Coates pointed out: "This [expansion]

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... is intrinsic to both in their relations with each other... Each essentially exerts pressure on the other, China because she simply *does*, India because she simply *must*... What would happen if both these civilisations were ever to become anything like equally powerful at the same time?”<sup>69</sup> Well, that time is now approaching fast, and it is likely to result in significant new geopolitical realignments. Both China after a “century of humiliation” and India after a millennium of decline are keen to assume the great power roles they believe to be their historical and civilisational right. Both want a new international status that is commensurate with their growing strength. Both remain suspicious of each other’s long-term agenda and intentions, and both see themselves as newly rising great Asian powers whose time has finally come. The rise of Han nationalism is matched by the rise of Hindu nationalism. As India combines its potential economic might with strategic might, its foreign policy is becoming increasingly assertive. This means that a resurgent India will face a rising China, which will ensure a conflict of interests between the two giants unless their power competition is managed carefully. It is not so much a clash of civilisations as a clash of the two “Middle Kingdoms” which had historically dominated in southern Asia and eastern Asia respectively—a clash of identical worldviews, similar aspirations, and interests. All the indications point to a geopolitical contest between China and India over domination of South, Southeast, and Central Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Just as Sino-Indian interactions invariably affected the intermediary kingdoms in Central and Southeast Asia in the first and second millennia, the state of Sino-Indian

relations will inevitably affect small and middle powers in the third millennium as well. The emergence of China and India as economic giants undoubtedly will throw a huge new weight onto the world’s geopolitical balance. The nature of the rivalry will be determined by how domestic political and economic developments in these two countries affect their power, their outlooks, and their foreign and security policies.

### **Future Tense**

All great powers are shaped by their own histories, values, and experiences and behave in distinct ways. The burden of history weighs heavily on Chinese and Indian elites. A desire to regain the lost glory and status, a sense of superiority and the linkage between domestic and external security are common to both. For India, a fractious polity and the lack of strategic thinking continue to bedevil foreign policy-making. China confronts the historical problem of holding together a geographically large empire, as evident from the present government’s attempt to create the sense of a united Chinese nationality in the face of perceived threats of internal unrest and foreign aggression (*nei luan wai huan*). The old tradition of stratagem and deception in strategic policy remains in vogue. The preceding analysis of Chinese and Indian strategic traditions indicates that as the preeminent and pivotal power in southern Asia, India perceives itself much as China has traditionally perceived itself in relation to eastern Asia. As in the past, the strategic cultures of China and India continue to influence their bilateral relations and how each handles its growing power and relates to other nations.

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There exists a sharp political and cultural chasm between the two civilisation-states. India embraces heterogeneity, accommodation, and pluralism. China worships homogeneity and uniformity. Its sense of superiority is based on a combination of cultural, political, and economic hubris. As China's power grows, a millennia-old sense of superiority will manifest itself in Chinese foreign policy behaviour as it seeks to impose its will and leave its imprint in different parts of the world. Their underlying power rivalry and their self-images as natural great powers and centres of civilisation and culture continue to drive them to support different countries and causes. Asia has never known both China and India growing strong simultaneously in such close proximity with overlapping spheres of influence. New economic prosperity and military strength is reawakening nationalist pride in India, which could bring about a clash with Chinese nationalism, if not handled

skillfully. The existence of two economically powerful nations will create new tensions as they both strive to stamp their authority on the region. In the short to medium term, their priority on domestic stability, economic development, and pragmatism in foreign policy would keep ambitions in check. It is possible that economically prosperous and militarily confident China and India will come to terms with each other eventually as their mutual containment policies start yielding diminishing returns, but this is unlikely to happen for a few decades. Since China and India have often shown an uncanny knack of being their own worst enemies, it is also possible that the two Asian Goliaths may not make it and instead break up into several independent states. After all, much of Chinese and Indian history is made up of long periods of internal disunity and turmoil when the centrifugal forces brought down even the most powerful empires.

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- 62 *As Coates puts it: "Apart from the Indians, whom the Chinese mind simply cannot cope with, the Chinese regard the rest of Asia as lesser people, deserving of benevolence by virtue of the plain fact that they are lesser people." Coates, China, India and the Ruins of Washington, 216. On India's claim that its attitude toward its neighbours is essentially benevolent, see Tanham, "India's Strategic Culture," 133.*
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