To those who study Chinese foreign policy, talk of “rivalry” between India and China immediately raises questions about the appropriateness of the term to describe the relationship. Certainly, at the elite level, the Chinese are focused on the United States and would like to think of their country’s relationship with the sole global superpower as a case of “rivalry” while that with India is seen at most as being “competitive,” and then, only in some sectors and parts of the world. The distinction between “competition” and “rivalry” is not merely a semantic one but important analytically.

Talk to the man on the street in India and even to certain sections of the elite, and it is clear that Pakistan dominates the mind more than China as a rival. The point, however, is that perceptions are slower to change than objective realities, and therefore, affect the development of what theoretically makes sense as the more likely rivalry, namely the India-China relationship—more sense, because India and China are closer in capabilities than India and Pakistan are, if one leaves the nuclear weapons dimension out of the latter relationship. Also, China and the United States are still rather far apart in material capabilities and if China’s several economic debilities are taken into consideration, the presumption of linear growth of its influence and capacity can also be misplaced just as reports of American decline are, making the use of “rivalry” for the US-China relationship, too, an overstatement.

Where the volume under review scores is in providing a deep theoretical look at the concept and conditions of rivalry buttressed with adequate background and empirical examination across a range of themes while leaving readers to draw their own conclusions on whether or not the India-China relationship is indeed a case of rivalry. The themes identified as sources of the rivalry range from the question of territory (or the boundary dispute), status, and conceptions of the international order to resources and water. But with the exception of the more intangible issues of status, international order, and strategic culture (examined by Xiaoyu Pu, Manjari Chatterjee Miller, and Andrew Scobell respectively), the authors largely find it difficult to state that the relationship ascends to the status of a genuine rivalry and fewer still actually see any real potential for conflict arising out of this rivalry.

Indeed, right off the bat, in his introduction, the editor T. V. Paul notes the differences in degree of “rivalry” between India and Pakistan on the one hand, and between India and China on the other, and notes the need for more work to incorporate the specifics of the latter case in the literature. Meanwhile, it is notable that in his chapter on India-China engagement in global institutions and governance issues, Feng Liu—the sole author based in China—does not once mention “rivalry” as an existing fact of India-China relations except to state that India might be “a potential rival” (p. 245). This is a pretty accurate description of the overall Chinese perception.

What all of this means in practice is that in the case of India, not enough public attention or allocation of resources is forthcoming on subjects or institutional capacity development related to China, the stronger country. And this is true despite Paul Diehl noting in the concluding chapter how the power asymmetry between the two countries causes the Indians more than the Chinese
to think of their relationship as constituting a rivalry. But because Chinese across the board view the stronger United States as the bigger threat/challenge/rival and therefore, plan accordingly, China is also much better prepared to deal with any challenge from India.

Some chapters in the book are hopeful that there are conditions in the India-China relationship that mitigate the scale of the rivalry. Liu’s chapter on India-China engagements in institutions is a case in point. But while he does offer the case studies of China’s objections to India’s membership to a permanent seat in the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the Nuclear Supplier’s Group (NSG) where their interests diverge, it can also be stated even with respect to the positive examples of cooperation he highlights, that for China any cooperation with India is transactional and not a matter of principle.

For example, despite Liu calling climate change an issue of convergence between India and China, positions of the two countries are diverging, with China and the United States subsequently coming out with their own climate deal in 2014 that surprised India. This was a far cry from the Chinese position at the Copenhagen talks in 2008, when it cooperated with India and other developing nations to pressure the US. Indian politicians and analysts have also begun pointing out that aligning with China was actually not helping India, noting that China contributes significantly more to global warming than India and therefore the two countries must be treated differently.

Meanwhile, Calvin Chen and Selina Ho in their chapters on the two countries’ search for energy resources and their water dispute respectively are quite correct in pointing out that the rivalry in both domains has been overstated. Ho’s chapter, however, notes the salience of the territorial issue in the discourse over water issues with the Indians at the receiving end of China’s blocking of an international loan for watershed development in Arunachal Pradesh. Unlike Pakistan, however, vis-à-vis India, the latter “does not use asymmetrical strategies and coercive bargaining against China” (p. 151).

This particular strand of Indian behavior, to hear the talk in India’s think-tank discussion halls, has cost it greatly—consider India’s support for the Chinese communist regime replacing the Republic of China in the UN Security Council, for example. What is more, nobody today, in any significant position of government or in the strategic community in India actually believes that China seeks a multipolar world in the long run, except to undermine the United States.

One major issue that is inadequately examined and which might prove a more serious potential driver of a genuine rivalry between India and China is the difference in the political systems of the two countries. This is a subject that receives almost no attention at all in India-China comparative studies. To an extent the blame lies with the Indian side conducting its foreign policy under the dogma of the Panchsheel principles of peaceful coexistence, of which one is the noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries. Despite being a democracy, India has shown none of the sometimes evangelical zeal of the United States or European democracies. This policy, of course, had its uses at a time when India as a still young democracy had to deal with multiple internal contradictions at home and had to try not to appear as a hegemon in its own neighborhood. While New Delhi does sometimes make its preferences clear, it has rarely been actively interventionist in the cause of democracy anywhere in the world.

While China too, after the upheaval of the Maoist era, cooled its revolutionary fervor abroad to focus on its economic growth and development, under Xi Jinping, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has returned to strongly ideological approaches in not just its domestic politics but also its economic and foreign policies. Thus, there is now a “China model” of politics and economic development under authoritarian, single-party leadership being promoted as an alternative to both Western-style democracy and the liberal international order, in which India, too, is a stakeholder. Miller’s point about how India does not appear to put forward an Indian model of a world order in sharp contrast to Chinese attempts to do precisely this is germane here. However, in addition to implications for the world order, the substantive consequence of this state of affairs might be that India itself is forced to strengthen its democratic moorings. Thus, the two countries could drift apart from whatever little commonality that they enjoy, whether proclaimed rhetorically or pursued in practice in the reform of international financial and other institutions.

At the same time, a further complication needs to be acknowledged in that the aspiration in India for faster development and growth actually makes the Chinese model of authoritarian leadership quite attractive to large segments of the Indian population. Nevertheless, the nativist turn of Indian politics under the currently ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in New Delhi also encourages the same trend as in China, of seeking exceptionalism at the global level. And the more Indians and Chinese get to know each other, the sharper the differences are likely to
This brings us to Xiaoyu Pu’s chapter on the role of status concerns in the India-China relationship. His hopeful conclusion is that the rivalry can be mitigated because in most cases this is related to India’s seeking membership in particular international organizations or “clubs,” where the most China might suffer is a degree of diminishing of its privileges but not exclusion. However, he also offers no proof that there is indeed such thinking among the Chinese leadership on matters of import to India such as its membership of the UNSC and the NSG.

One part of the answer might also lie in a theme that crops up repeatedly in the book, from Paul’s introduction to Diehl’s concluding chapter, including notably also the chapters by Pu and Liu, which is Chinese concerns about a closer India-US relationship. Diehl puts it best when he says that the “rivalry between the Chinese and the Indians ... will be partly a function of the US-China rivalry” (p. 259), and perhaps this is an aspect that deserved a chapter all to itself.

Mathew Castle shows how China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with its strong South Asia component, has created serious concerns for India (curiously, his chapter is placed in a section in the volume titled “Mitigators” [of rivalry]). Indian resentment and indignation over the BRI is something the Chinese are finding hard to deal with or even acknowledge not least because of their own political ambitions and compulsions at the domestic level. While the BRI is a larger strategic project for China that seeks to solidify its economic and political leadership in its near and extended neighborhood, it is also very much an exercise in strengthening CPC legitimacy at home as a defender and promoter of the country’s image and interests. Thus, as Scobell points out in the context of the strategic cultures of India and China, there are reasons for “great pessimism” about the prospects of the relationship, and their “rivalry is destined to persist” (pp. 181-82).

Shortcomings? It is astonishing that a book on India-China relations does not feature one Indian author working in India itself and just one from inside China. This is not a call for parochialism—and there is altogether too much navel-gazing in both India and China that is remedied by perspective from afar—but to comment entirely at a distance from the daily heat and perspiration, and the smog (both literal and figurative) of India and China also tends to push analyses askew. This volume is, nevertheless, an important addition to the literature and students of the India-China dynamic should use it as a platform to further comparative studies of what is without doubt one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world.

Notes


[7]. See for instance, the BJP’s own internal position documented in Lalmani Verma, “Message in BJP cadres’ training manual: China is a threat to India,” The Indian Express, June 18, 2018, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/message-in-bjp-cadres-training-manual-china-is-a-threat-to-india-
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