1 What about enduring rivalries?

At the height of the Cold War, Edgar Snow, a former correspondent in war-torn China, published *The Other Side of the River: Red China Today* (1962). The title of his book invites empathy and understanding for one’s foreign counterpart, invoking the Latin root for the word *rivalry*, which refers to inhabitants on opposite banks of a river. Snow was accused of pro-communist sympathies during the McCarthy era and left his native United States to live in Switzerland, where he died in 1972. Some of his remains were returned to China and buried on the grounds of Beijing University, where a plaque stands to commemorate him as “an American friend of the Chinese people.”

In recent years, especially in the wake of China’s rapid growth, some US intellectual and policy circles have suggested that Asia is poised to enter a more tumultuous era, to be occasioned by a revival and intensification of interstate rivalries (e.g. Betts 1993/94; Friedberg 1993/94). This book disagrees with this proposition. It argues instead that the region’s general trend has been moving in the direction of rivalry abatement. Moreover, it sees the predominant inclination to treat rivalries as primarily bilateral contests – a penchant shared by many quantitative and qualitative scholars of international relations – to be analytically unhelpful, as it obscures rather than clarifies the dynamics that sustain many rivalries. Local rivalries are often embedded, or nested, in the strategic competition between leading powers, changing these rivalries into multilateral affairs. Relations between the leading powers can decisively influence the perpetuation or termination of local rivalries. In at least this sense, foreign variables tend to trump domestic variables in the life cycles of many contentious dyads commonly described as *enduring rivalries* in the relevant literature (e.g. Diehl 1998; Diehl and Goertz 2000). Naturally, the evolution of rivalries also reflects states’ changing domestic conditions and leadership thinking. With respect to East and South Asia, I emphasize the far-reaching consequences of the move by many of their governing elites to economic development as the overriding policy priority; a concern that in turn requires stable external relations, promotes
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economic interdependence, and keeps the dynamics of rivalry in check and sometimes even puts them in reverse. These elites’ internationalist economic orientation – in line with the “trading state” model described by Richard Rosecrance (1986) – also encourages multilateral ties or what has been described sometimes as “omnidirectional diplomacy.” The consequent de-alignment of traditional alliance relationships prevalent during the Cold War tends to again dampen rivalries and contain the danger of contagious conflict. Finally, although Sino-American relations are not without an important element of competition and tension, these ties are quite different from the nature of Soviet–American relations during the Cold War, which provided much of the fuel for sustaining, even abetting, local rivalries. In advancing these arguments, I will address several seeming puzzles and oversights in the current discourse.

Rivalry identification and some seeming puzzles

One often hears Sino-American, Sino-Indian, and Sino-Russian relations described as “rivalries” (e.g. Ganguly and Thompson 2011a). It is of course true that Beijing and Washington were outright hostile toward each other in the 1950s and 1960s, and both sides still feel uneasy and suspicious about the other even today. Their armed forces fought in Korea and engaged in repeated confrontations across the Taiwan Strait. But there was also a period from roughly Richard Nixon’s visit to Beijing in 1972 to the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989 during which the two countries cooperated strategically to oppose the USSR. They were then, for all practical purposes, informal allies. Similarly, Sino-Soviet (Russian) relations underwent enormous transformations in the post-1945 period. Beijing and Moscow were formal allies until their relationship became acrimonious and then downright hostile in the early 1960s. Prior to this breakup, there was genuine affection and intimate cooperation between these two communist states and their peoples, so that it would not be an exaggeration to describe their relationship as a security community (Deutsch et al. 1957) in which war had become unthinkable, and where pervasive narratives showed a sense of common cause and shared destiny (incidentally, security communities are subject to reversal, as shown by the American Civil War). More recently, with the settlement of their border disputes, Beijing and Moscow have had a rapprochement. China has imported most of its weapons from Russia, and the two have collaborated to oppose various US-led initiatives, including blocking United Nations intervention in Syria. One encounters similar changes in Sino-Indian ties, which were quite cordial until their border war in 1962. Since Rajiv Gandhi’s visit to Beijing in late
1988, their relations have entered into a more relaxed phase, even if they have not quite returned to the same level of official friendliness that was evident in the early 1950s. India was then a strong advocate against the West's diplomatic isolation of China, and served as a conduit of communication between Beijing and Washington prior to and during the Korean War. The famous Five Principles of Co-existence – or Panchshila (“five principles” in Hindi) – were first codified in the Sino-Indian treaty of 1954. Beijing and New Delhi have now demilitarized their border, even though they have not yet definitively settled their boundary disputes. They have also initiated other confidence-building measures and entered into increasing economic exchanges. Somehow, the word “rivalry” does not quite capture the major turns and twists of relations for the three pairs of countries just mentioned. As a consequence, it tends to obscure rather than illuminate, implying continuous contention or competition when there have in fact been periods of marked cooperation. Elevated tension and recurrent crises only characterize some periods of these relations.

One can say the same about Sino-Vietnamese and Indo-Pakistani relations, as well as relations on the Korean Peninsula and across the Taiwan Strait. These relations have encountered tense periods, even large-scale wars, but it is not accurate to describe them as rivalries to the extent that this concept refers to unremitting hostility, steady conflict, and/or relentless competition. There have clearly also been periods of relaxation, such as during the presidencies of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun in South Korea, and since the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou in Taiwan. There was also relative calm in Indo-Pakistani relations for more than a decade after their 1971 war, which ended in Bangladesh’s independence. Thus, these countries’ relations have also gone through major changes: both improvements and deteriorations. If by “enduring rivalry” one means recurrent confrontations with a high risk of escalation to war, relations among at least some of these dyads have improved to such a point that this description does not fit. It seems odd therefore that some analysts have shown an acute concern for rivalry revival or intensification in Asia, when the available evidence points rather decisively to a substantial decline in the incidence of militarized disputes in, say, the last ten years compared to the previous decade for most (thus, not all) of the contentious dyads just mentioned, as well as for some others (e.g. between Vietnam and Cambodia, Thailand and Cambodia, and Thailand and Myanmar). This generalization does not deny that highly politicized acrimonies can surface occasionally, as they have between China and Japan and between Japan and South Korea over their competing sovereignty claims to the Diaoyutai/Senkaku and Dokdo/Takeshima islands, respectively. Official protests and popular outbursts highlighted these much-publicized
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controversies in 2012. Remarkably, however, the governments involved have often acted to contain these conflicts, such as by avoiding the use of military vessels in asserting their territorial claims and by restraining their own citizens from undertaking provocative actions.

As soon as one acknowledges that rivalries may go into remission and that some may even end in reconciliation, many of the frequently cited factors no longer appear to be capable of explaining the initiation, maintenance, and termination of rivalries. Factors such as physical or cultural proximity, regime type and ideology, and demographic and military balance are usually analytic constants, or at least change rather slowly. As such, they are poor candidates for explaining the rise and decline of animosity between contending states; they may at best serve as background information that provides the necessary but insufficient conditions for rivalries to develop and take hold. Physical proximity and cultural homogeneity, for example, do not in themselves explain why the European states were once a highly contentious group, or why contemporary Middle Eastern relations continue to be turbulent – even though these same conditions have not had a similar effect on relations among the Latin American countries. That is, factors such as those just cited cannot in themselves explain both variations over time (as in contemporary European relations compared to their past) and variations across regions (as in the differences in the rivalry propensities of Middle Eastern versus Latin American countries, both of which have relatively homogenous cultures compared to those in East Asia).

There is sometimes a seeming sense of après moi, le déluge in the writings of some US observers, a sense that with a reduced US profile in the region, East Asia is poised to enter a more dangerous period. Whether implicitly or explicitly, this reduced US profile is presented in juxtaposition to China’s increasing profile, as occasioned by recent and ongoing power shifts between these two countries. But why should power shifts affect the chances of conflict recidivism or rivalry intensification? Most analysts seem to take it for granted that power shifts are somehow destabilizing, without spelling out the causal mechanisms motivating this expectation. Doesn’t the balance of power theory assert that a more equal distribution of capabilities between two leading countries, such as the United States and China, should be conducive to peace and stability? There has been a long line of self-professed realists claiming that bipolarity or bipolarization should enhance the prospects for interstate peace and stability. Viewed from the perspective of power transition theory, shouldn’t a latecomer’s increased power translate into its greater stake in the existing international order? As the beneficiary of this order (after all, it has improved its position relative to others), shouldn’t this rising state
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want to maintain it rather than to undermine it? The rising state’s power to change the international order may have increased but its motivation for doing so should have declined. Conversely, shouldn’t the dominant but declining power have more reason to change the rules of engagement, since it is the one facing a deteriorating situation? Different scholars may naturally have different expectations. But they should consider alternative hypotheses and ask for the explication of the logic behind competing propositions and the presentation of systematic evidence germane to them.

More fundamentally, power shifts should not affect directly the probability of conflict occurrence or recurrence in the revival or intensification of a rivalry. These shifts should only affect the relative bargaining power of the relevant disputants. The side gaining power should now be able to demand more concessions, and the side suffering a decline should come under pressure to make more. This change should not in itself alter the probability that the two sides will be able to conclude an agreement – or for that matter, the probability that they will come to blows (again, in the absence of some other, as yet undisclosed intervening factors). It should only affect the terms of a prospective settlement, and not the probability that a deal will be reached or that a dispute will escalate. At best, those who imply or propose that power shifts influence the probability of conflict occurrence or recurrence have an incomplete story. There are missing links in their argument requiring theoretical explication and empirical confirmation. For instance, a country’s increasing power may encourage it to increase its demands on its counterpart, but it still remains to be explained why this counterpart experiencing decreasing power is unwilling or unable to make concessions commensurate with its relative decline. If both sides recognize and agree on the power shifts that have occurred, why can’t they reach an accommodation reflecting these changes? Analysts will have to introduce variables such as the resistance (or rigidity) of officials’ perceptions and their country’s policy institutions with respect to changing circumstances, their non-rational reactions to such changes (e.g. anxiety, arrogance, overconfidence), and the increasing uncertainties in judging the other side’s capabilities and intentions as intervening factors in hypothesizing the causal chain that links power shifts to an increased danger of conflict.

Given this line of argument, one is naturally drawn to the questions of why the parties to enduring rivalries are unable to strike a deal to settle their disputes and why they find themselves engaging in repeated confrontations. There is an extensive literature that assigns naivety, perceptual distortions, cognitive biases, or simply misjudgments as the leading causes of interstate conflict. Such attributions, however, seem more
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strained when they are applied to an explanation of enduring rivalries as opposed to conflicts between occasional disputants. As their name implies, enduring rivals are, after all, not strangers. They should have the most intimate knowledge about and extensive experience in dealing with each other, if for no other reason than that they have lived in close physical (and often cultural) proximity with each other and have had repeated rounds of military clash. Who should be in a better position to understand Pyongyang than those in Seoul, and vice versa? And leaders on opposite sides of the Taiwan Strait should know each other all too well. The same goes for Indian and Pakistani leaders, and Israeli officials and their Arab counterparts. It seems reasonable to infer that enduring rivals should be those least likely to blunder into a war because of ignorance or misjudgment. In other words, these disputants should be the least prone to misunderstanding and misperceiving each other. Why then does some research show that with each additional militarized dispute, the chances of another similar episode tend to rise rather than to fall for these contestants? That is, why do these contestants challenge each other time and again, and with increasing frequency over time (Colaresi and Thompson 2002; Gartzke and Simon 1999), when one would expect that they should have learned better about how to manage their conflict, given their prior experiences? Shouldn’t one expect to see the exact opposite: that is, with each additional round of confrontation, shouldn’t they be in a better position to resolve uncertainties about their counterparts’ capabilities and intentions, thereby making it easier for them to reach a settlement? Having gained a better understanding of each other’s capabilities and intentions after each successive crisis, they should be better able to avoid another one. From this perspective, incomplete information (or uncertainties about the other side’s capabilities and intentions), a leading cause of war (Fearon 1995), should be the least germane factor to the blocking of a settlement between enduring rivals. Yet contrary to this expectation, historical evidence suggests that with each militarized dispute, the disputants’ chances of having another one tend to rise rather than fall. Something else must also be at work.

The mystery deepens when one acknowledges that most enduring rivalries involve highly asymmetric dyads. The contests between China and Taiwan, China and Vietnam, India and Pakistan, Vietnam and Cambodia, and South and North Korea are surely highly lopsided affairs, with one side enjoying a commanding advantage over the other. Although one may reasonably argue that the gaps separating the national powers of China and India, China and Russia, and China and the United States have narrowed considerably in the recent past, few would deny that they were much wider during the most tense periods of their
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respective relations, such as when China and India fought their border war in 1962, when China clashed with the USSR in 1969, and when China engaged the United States in Korea in 1951–3. Why would the weaker side knowingly challenge a much stronger opponent? Why would it do so repeatedly, often after having suffered a setback previously, as demonstrated most clearly by the outcomes of several wars fought by India and Pakistan (and Israel and its Arab neighbors, and Iran and Iraq)? Don’t the leaders of the weaker belligerent know that their country can be crushed militarily in a contest of arms by their much stronger opponent – to the point of harming the physical integrity of their country and the political survival of their regime? They are surely not so delusional as to believe that they can physically prevail over an opponent that is many times stronger according to most conventional measures of tangible national assets. Did the leaders in Islamabad really believe that they could defeat India on the battlefield, and did those in Hanoi think that they could accomplish the same feat in fighting the United States and China on separate occasions? If not, why would they accept a war with their much stronger adversary unless they felt that their opponent would be restrained from fully exploiting its military advantage, and unless they had in mind something other than an outright military victory and armed resolution? The ultimately successful campaigns of secession waged by the Bosnians and Kosovars against the militarily stronger Serbs also support this intuition, even though these adversaries do not necessarily show up in standard lists of enduring rivalries. To introduce a final example, many analysts have used the term “rivalry” to describe inter-Korean relations. But even without accounting for its alliance with the United States, Seoul enjoys a commanding lead over Pyongyang. Already in the 1990s, South Korea’s economy was 27, perhaps even 40 times larger than North Korea’s, and its military spending was 7 times higher (Kang 2003c: 357; Suh 2004: 137). Most people picture roughly matched contestants when they think about rivalries. Does it make sense to speak of a rivalry when there are such large disparities between the two sides?

Third-party involvement

That the weaker contestant in a highly asymmetric rivalry often takes chances to confront a much stronger one poses a puzzle (Colaresi, Rasler and Thompson 2007; Diehl and Goertz 2000; Gochman and Maoz 1984; Goertz, Jones and Diehl 2005; Grieco 2001). One possible answer to this puzzle is that its leaders are reasonably certain that their foe will not be able to bring its superior capabilities fully to bear in a conflict. This intuition in turn brings us back to the observation made earlier that
local rivalries are often nested in larger contests for influence, waged by the leading powers. A third party’s support provides a possible answer to the phenomenon that weaker countries often challenge their stronger counterparts even in the face of previous setbacks (Chan 2012a). The anticipated support from an ally offers a safety net against the most catastrophic outcomes. North Korea would not have been as adamant in its policies had it expected that Beijing would abandon it to fend for itself, and Taiwan and Pakistan would have been more accommodative in their relations with China and India respectively had they not expected support from Washington. Alliance politics therefore holds the key to explaining the maintenance, containment, and termination of some well-known rivalries, such as those between Turkey and Greece, Peru and Ecuador, East and West Germany, North and South Vietnam, and Ethiopia and Somalia (Chan 2010a). Competition between the United States and the USSR at one time fueled the latter contests; once the foreign sponsors withdrew, some of these contests ended abruptly (as with the collapse of the Berlin and Saigon regimes). Naturally, a great power can also act to arbitrate and curtail conflicts between its junior partners, such as when Washington intervened in the disputes between Ankara and Athens and between Lima and Quito. These latter examples of pivotal deterrence (Crawford 2003) by a patron are however fundamentally different from the reciprocal bolstering that occurred when competing great powers intervened to support their respective protégés, such as on the eve of World War I and during the Cold War (when Germany supported Austria-Hungary and Russia supported Serbia, and when the USSR and China supported North Vietnam and the United States backed South Vietnam).

These remarks draw attention to factors that are exogenous rather than endogenous to the contestants in local conflicts. This does not mean that endogenous factors have no influence. They clearly do. For example, the end of the Cold War – a long-running feud between the United States and the USSR – had much to do with the internal decay occurring within the latter. Moscow’s legitimacy deficit and economic stagnation were instrumental in forcing the Kremlin’s hand in accepting a policy of retrenchment. At the same time, Moscow’s diminishing ability to keep up its ideological competition and armament race with the United States and the West as a whole was not irrelevant to Mikhail Gorbachev’s “new thinking” (Wohlforth 2003). Similarly, new leaders enjoyed a political “opening” to initiate economic liberalization and democratic consolidation after costly authoritarian rule in Argentina and Chile (Mani 2011). As with Gorbachev, they were able to circumvent and overcome the opposition of hardline veto groups and undertake a conciliatory foreign
policy that put their countries’ longstanding rivalry behind them. As will be discussed further in Chapter 6, these cases of policy reversal replaced a statist-nationalist grand strategy (emphasizing government control and foreign competition) with an internationalist one (emphasizing economic opening and domestic liberalization). This transformation entailed a fundamental alteration in the compositions and incentives of the domestic ruling coalitions of the relevant countries and changed the dynamics of their external relations, thereby fostering a new environment conducive to rivalry abatement and economic cooperation, as described by Etel Solingen (1998, 2007). The same general processes were repeated with the ascendance of an internationalist ruling coalition in Taiwan, whose policy emphasis and orientation in turn contributed to the relaxation of cross-Strait tension (Kastner 2009). In all these cases, there appears to be an important causal connection between external or internal shocks (e.g. foreign setback, defeat in war, domestic legitimacy crisis) on the one hand and the conclusion of rivalries on the other, with the arrival of new leaders with new thinking providing a crucial linkage between the two. There are accordingly important interactive effects between domestic and international changes.

Rivalries, as already suggested, often escalate to wars (that is after all the reason why analysts focus on these contentious dyads in their studies). But wars also often end rivalries – such as when the US victory in World War II effectively brought an end to American–German and American–Japanese rivalries (the effects of war can also be indirect, such as when Argentina’s loss of the Malvinas/Falklands conflict led to the disgrace and exit of the military junta and ushered in the era of democratic civilian rule, which eventually helped to end that country’s rivalry with Chile). Of course, the end of World War II also brought forth post-conflict schisms that promoted both the United States–USSR rivalry and foreign involvement in the Chinese and Korean civil wars, which turned into stalemates and continue to present focal points for rivalry discourse to this day. Disengagement by a foreign power can similarly present a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can bring about an end to supposed rivalries, such as those resulting from the collapse of East Germany and South Vietnam. On the other hand, it can weaken restraints that had once held back old animosities, such as in the internecine clashes between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the wake of the USSR’s demise and, of course, the ethnic conflicts that tore apart the former Yugoslavia.

This discussion naturally leads to several clusters of questions. The first pertains to the incentives on the part of local contestants’ foreign allies. Why do these leading powers sometimes decide to intervene on behalf of their clients, and why do they sometimes decide to refrain
What about enduring rivalries? from such involvement? When does the role played by these third parties have the effect of abetting the intensification and perpetuation of rivalries, and when does it have the effect of promoting restraint? Alliances, formal or de facto, enable the more powerful allies not only to support their junior partners in local conflicts but also to “tether” or control them. The second cluster of questions addresses the incentives of the junior partners in an alliance, especially the weaker ones in local contests. These countries are motivated to internationalize their bilateral conflict by engaging their foreign patrons in efforts to challenge their stronger adversaries. Thus, alliances can ensnare major powers in local contests through their junior partners’ manipulation. This latter phenomenon naturally presents a “moral hazard” for the alliance leaders. The stronger and more credible their commitment to backing their respective junior partners, the more likely are the latter to exploit this backing in confronting their respective local adversaries, even to the point of deliberately escalating a conflict contrary to the alliance leaders’ wishes. Conversely, weak support for the junior partners or policy vacillation by the alliance leaders can motivate the stronger adversaries in local contests to start a conflict aimed at crushing their rivals. This is a perennial problem in mounting extended deterrence (Huth 1988): the foreign patron has to steer a middle course that avoids entrapment on the one hand and that discourages aggression on the other. Yet a third cluster of questions asks about the interactions among multiple rivalries, with some nested in or connected to others. Washington wishes Beijing to influence Pyongyang in ways that are congenial to its interests in addressing inter-Korean tension, just as Beijing wants Washington to act in ways that are helpful to its agenda of settling differences across the Taiwan Strait. Whether either behaves in ways desired by the other and how their respective allies behave are interrelated matters. There are ripple and cascade effects across different conflict arenas. One obvious illustration comes from declining Soviet support for Moscow’s allies in New Delhi and Hanoi in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a development that not only facilitated Sino-Russian rapprochement but also Sino-Indian, Sino-Vietnamese and Vietnamese–Cambodian reconciliation. Declining Soviet support, for example, inclined Hanoi to withdraw its troops from Cambodia, which in turn met one of Beijing’s conditions for conciliating with Hanoi.

A strong implication of this discussion is that foreign support can sustain a rivalry, even one that involves contestants with lopsided capabilities. The weaker side holds out, refusing to make concessions that would have otherwise been required by its objective weakness because it expects its foreign ally to rally to its cause. It sometimes even escalates the