PART I

Introduction
CHAPTER I

Introduction

As the United States’ “unipolar moment” wanes, Asia is witnessing the simultaneous rise of two powers, China and India. While the polarity of the emerging international system is a matter of considerable scholarly debate, most agree that China is in a separate league compared to other rising powers.\(^1\) Indeed, China’s phenomenal rise poses a significant challenge to America’s “systemic leadership” as the lead economy and the center for technological/energy innovation.\(^2\) China’s asymmetric ascent vis-à-vis India – as it began growing earlier than India and continued to grow/innovate faster – has meant that International Relations scholarship has focused on the US–China strategic rivalry to understand the propensity for conflict in Asia and its implications for the international system.\(^3\) However, the China–India strategic rivalry, which is equally consequential for the Asian and global order, has been relatively ignored in the academic scholarship even though there is recognition in the policy community that the “rise of multiple powers [in Asia] – particularly China and India – could spark increased rivalries.”\(^4\)

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The aim of this book is threefold. First, we describe and analyze the Sino-Indian strategic rivalry and its implications for rivalry escalation. While previous studies have certainly not ignored describing the grievances of the rivalry participants (as discussed in the following chapters), they tend to list the various foci of the dispute without considering how they correspond to what we know about the general behavior of actors in “strategic rivalries.” Furthermore, there is a strong tendency to focus too much on the spatial (or territorial) dimension of the Sino-Indian rivalry while ignoring its positional dimension. However, we know that spatial and positional rivalries are different not only in terms of their causation but also in their propensity to escalate, to persist, and to terminate.

Second, the Sino-Indian rivalry is also characterized by material and cognitive asymmetries. As shown in Chapters 2 and 6, the material power gap between China and India is substantial, and it has widened in recent years. Additionally, Indian elites regard China as their principal rival, ranked above Pakistan, while China’s elites regard India as a lesser rival, ranked below its other rivals, the United States and Japan, which are perceived as its peers. Consequently, not only do we analyze the conflict dynamics in the Sino-Indian contest using the framework of strategic rivalries but we also pay attention to the spatial and positional contests that characterize their rivalry. Additionally, we examine how their asymmetries are shaping their conflict behavior as they are novel and deserve special attention. We demonstrate that, these differences notwithstanding, China has in fact begun to pay more attention to India in recent years.

Third, we show that the Sino-Indian rivalry is crucial for the regional order in Asia and for the global order. An inordinate focus on US–China rivalry has drawn attention away from the Sino-Indian rivalry and its very significant ramifications for the prospects of war and peace in twenty-first-century Asia. Our analysis is informed by our understanding of the evolution of global warfare and the tendency in the academic literature to highlight clashes between declining global leaders and rising regional leaders. Although this “global-regional” clash is important, warfare usually

breaks out because of conflict between the rising regional leader and other actors in the neighborhood.  

In the contemporary international system, Asia is the most likely venue for war between regional powers. Accordingly, we argue that it is dangerous to overemphasize global-regional rivalry at the expense of regional rivalries that may be more critical to conflict escalation. In this context, we think that much more attention needs to be devoted to the Sino-Indian rivalry than currently being given, especially because several observers tend to dismiss it as a peripheral issue. For example, the Center for Preventive Action’s annual Preventive Priorities Survey ranked a potential clash between China and India as a Tier III concern (which only deserved a “low” priority) in 2019, while dropping it altogether from its three-tiered list of concerns in 2020. However, the clash was raised to a Tier II conflict of “moderate” concern in 2021 and 2022.

The rest of this introductory chapter is divided into three sections that explain the core features of our argument and the layout of the book. The next section provides a brief introduction to strategic rivalries and the conflict dynamic thereof, while also focusing on asymmetries that impact the behavior of the antagonists. The following section provides a description of our analytic approach that focuses on the China–India rivalry as well as its interaction with the US–China rivalry, and our emphasis on relying on history as well as general theories of war, great power transitions, and escalation/de-escalation dynamics of strategic rivalries. The third section provides an outline of our various chapters and our arguments related to the specific themes and issues in the Sino-Indian contest. Finally, we conclude by arguing that the Sino-Indian rivalry should be taken more seriously given its implications for the regional order in Asia and the wider world.

**Strategic Rivalries**

States interact with other states in various ways. A fundamental difference in international politics is the categorical distinction made between friends and

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enemies.12 Friends are not threatening. Interaction between friends or allies, therefore, is usually fairly cooperative. Enemies may be quite threatening although the levels of threat may vary over time. Interaction between enemies, as a consequence, is usually conflictual. But there is also a hierarchical element that needs to be considered.13 Very strong and very weak states can regard one another as enemies but there may not be much that the weaker parties can do about their grievances (without assistance from other stronger states) because weaker states are simply not sufficiently competitive with the kind of resources their stronger enemies can draw upon.

Rivalries are relationships in which the adversary has been assigned the category of a threatening enemy and is operating in the same competitive league (at least as far as the issues under contention are concerned).14 The term “rivalry,” of course, is quite a familiar one in international relations discourse. Yet it is only recently that we have begun to deal with its implications in an explicit and theoretical fashion. In doing so, we have discovered that rivalries are not so numerous that they cannot be inventoried and dated for life cycles (origin and termination) and outcomes.15 They can also be categorized by grievances that fuel them. Positional rivalries are about competitions over which state will benefit from possessing greater influence in a given global or regional locale. Spatial rivalries pit two states in a contest over the exclusive control of a specific territory. Ideological rivalries characterize interstate feuds over whose version of doctrine is superior. Interventionary rivalries are scaled-down type of positional rivalries in which one state claims

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the right to intervene in or manipulate the affairs of usually an adjacent state that resists said interventions and manipulations.

Given that some states have more than one rival to contend with, an important type of adversarial relationship is the principal rivalry. States that have only one rival are engaged in principal rivalries by default. States that have multiple rivals often rank order them according to which ones have greater significance. In such cases, the principal rival is the most important one. However, these categorizations can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical. Two states may accord the principal rival status to one another, or only one state may see it that way while the other state is actually more focused on some other conflict relationship.

One serious complication is that rivalries are not necessarily of one type or the other. They can be a complicated mix of various types that have been identified above. Our assertion, nonetheless, is that different types of rivalries behave differently, and therefore we need to pay attention to typology when we are analyzing rivalries. Importantly, even asymmetries do not necessarily produce fixed effects, as they may give the differently ranked states in the dyad different incentives and motives related to conflict escalation and de-escalation. Exactly how these characteristics matter in general, and specifically in the case of the Sino-Indian rivalry, is addressed at length in the ensuing chapters.

Analytical Approach

Our research design is eclectic. We focus on a single rivalry case – the Sino-Indian rivalry. However, we rely on other cases to explore comparatively the various dimensions of this case that we think have not been given sufficient attention to date. Thus, one question to be addressed is whether there is more to the Sino-Indian rivalry than meets the eye. Our analysis of the origins and evolution of this rivalry demonstrates that despite the excessive focus on the spatial dimension of this rivalry their positional contest may be more consequential. Even though spatial issues are more likely to generate militarized conflict than positional issues, the latter with their emphasis on rank in a pecking order are far more difficult to resolve.\(^{16}\) \(^{17}\)


We rely on histories of foreign policy, theories of general wars, great power transitions, and processes thought to drive hostility escalation within rivalries as we analyze the Sino-Indian strategic rivalry and its interaction with the Sino-American rivalry. This allows us to demonstrate that it is not always the rivalry between the two leading contenders for systemic leadership that is most critical to war/peace outcomes. In other words, we show that there is a pattern of regional rivalries playing critical roles in the movement toward systemic wars as opposed to a direct contest between a rising regional leader and a declining systemic leader.

Another question involves the role of asymmetries in rivalries as well as their interconnections with other (related) rivalries. Understanding this provides us insights into the likely future of the Sino-Indian rivalry. Asymmetries are associated with mixed effects and contain within them the possibilities for rivalry escalation as well de-escalation. Since asymmetries in particular domains – economic, nuclear, or naval – are nested within the larger politico-strategic context of rivalry, they produce different tendencies for conflict. Additionally, we also pay attention to factors that link the Sino-Indian rivalry with the belligerents’ other rivalries, especially the Sino-American and the Indo-Pakistani rivalries, given the Indo-American and Sino-Pakistani alignments. What are the factors in these interconnected rivalries that will escalate and de-escalate their hostilities? We probe this likelihood, subject to assumptions that are made as explicit as possible.

In undertaking this analysis, we make extensive use of published reports from the governments of the United States, India, and China (published in English). Additionally, we also rely on the existing scholarly literature on the Sino-Indian dynamic in our assessment of the propensity for conflict in this dyad. Notably, we draw upon the Chinese literature on India (published in English) in the context of Sino-Indian and Sino-American rivalries. Of late, China’s leading scholars of international relations are paying increased attention to India on matters related to war, peace, and international order (despite their asymmetries as shown subsequently). More specifically, we look at Chinese journals published by the institutions affiliated with the Chinese government. These journals include Contemporary International Relations, published by the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), and China International Studies, published by the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS). CICIR is a think tank that is closely associated with the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) Foreign Affairs Office and China’s Ministry of State Security (the ministry that oversees foreign intelligence),
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while CIIS is associated with China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

Core Arguments and Chapter Outlines

There are different views on the Sino-Indian rivalry in the extant literature. Shirk argued that this is a “one-sided rivalry” because China does not think of India as a rival even though India thinks of China as a rival. According to Garver, the Sino-Indian rivalry is not one-sided; it is asymmetric because China deliberately understates India as a rival due ultimately to the material power gap between them that favors China. Finally, Westad asserted that “China’s biggest foreign policy challenge in the future will be India” and that “it will be difficult for Beijing to avoid future rivalry with Asia’s other rising power.”

What is noteworthy about these diverse views on the Sino-Indian rivalry is that these scholars do not engage with the theoretical literature on “rivalries” (though they use the term “rivalry” as it is a familiar term in the international relations discourse). In fact, most scholars of the Sino-Indian relationship do not employ the rivalries framework. For example, focusing primarily on their border dispute in the Himalayas, Fravel argued that India is a “second-” threat for China as Beijing has traditionally focused on (and continues to focus on) East Asia. However, in the same volume, Zhang noted that the Sino-Indian contest is more than a mere border dispute. According to him, there is “pessimism about future prospects of this relationship” in China even though India is not considered “as important as the United States or Japan” because India affects “all the major arenas of Chinese foreign policy.”

22 Notable exceptions are the chapters by T. V. Paul ("Explaining Conflict and Cooperation in the China–India Rivalry." 3–24) and Paul F. Diehl ("Whither Rivalry or Withered Rivalry?,” 253–272) in T. V. Paul (ed.), The China-India Rivalry in the Globalization Era (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018). However, these scholars take the dispute-density approach to rivalries as opposed to the “strategic rivalries” approach. Also see footnote 15.
related to major power relations, the periphery (neighbors), the developing world, and global governance. In other words, there is a wide array of views in the extant literature on Sino-Indian strategic relations.

This book analyzes the Sino-Indian contest as a “strategic rivalry” given that most of the extant literature does not engage with this concept. The book is divided into five parts. Following this introduction in Part I, Chapter 2 provides an overview of the nature of the Sino-Indian antagonism as strategic rivalry, including the salience of the spatial and positional issues under contention. While the Sino-Indian territorial dispute in the Himalayas is hardly insignificant, it is their positional contest that is more central to their overall rivalry. More specifically, China and India have been engaged in positional rivalry for leadership not only in South Asia but in the larger Asian region (including Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean). Furthermore, despite the widening asymmetry in their material capabilities in recent years, the Sino-Indian rivalry shows no signs of withering away. If anything, this contest seems to be intensifying, and although war is not preordained, the possibility of escalation cannot be discounted because of the multiple functional issues implicated in this rivalry (including Tibet, water, and space, among others). The entanglement of the Sino-Indian rivalry with other key players, especially the United States and Pakistan, further heightens the possibility of escalation.

Part II of this book builds on this overview of the Sino-Indian strategic rivalry to explain how positional and spatial concerns have influenced the course of their rivalry since the 1940s. Chapter 3 explains the early positional contest between China and India in the 1940s and the 1950s. It explains the Indian and Chinese claims to Asian leadership as well as the roles that the two countries envisaged for the other in an Asia led by them. This Sino-Indian positional contest was most apparent in three venues: (i) in various Asian multilateral fora (such as the 1947 Asian Relations Conference and the 1955 Bandung Conference) and in India’s attempts to mediate in conflicts involving China and other players; (ii) in the Himalayan states (Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim) and in Southeast Asia; and (iii) in Tibet. The Tibet issue was particularly fraught with strategic consequences. As China sought India’s help to consolidate its own rule in Tibet, it gave India an

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