



A Trap or a Theatre? Rethinking the Thucydides Trap in INDIA- CHINA Context

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Abstract

The Thucydides Trap, a concept that describes the inevitability of conflict between a rising and an established power, has often been applied to the India-China rivalry, which is one of the most significant Geopolitical contests of the 21st century. Both ancient civilizations have long engaged in diplomatic, military and economic interactions. Unlike the Western hegemonic struggles, their rivalry is shaped by distinct historical and strategic philosophies necessitating an alternative analytical framework since this existing binary framework may not fully encapsulate the complexity of the India-China relationship as application of thucydides trap often overlooks indigenous strategic traditions and their implications for power competition and conflict avoidance. This study aims to explore whether the rivalry fits the traditional thucydides trap model or represents a unique civilizational balancing act with distinct Geopolitical and strategic characteristics. The study employs a qualitative approach, analysing historical texts, policy documents and contemporary Geopolitical advancements to examine the India – China competition from multiple strategic perspectives. The key findings indicate that their rivalry is shaped more by strategic containment, economic interdependence and soft power competition rather than an inevitable trajectory towards war. Their Conflict remains confined to border tensions, regional power struggles and controlled escalation rather than full-scale military confrontation. This implies that understanding the rivalry beyond the thucydides trap can inform diplomatic strategies, regional policy-making and global power dynamics offering alternative models of power competition rooted in Asian strategic traditions.

Keywords: thucydides trap, power transition theory, strategic containment, constructivism, multipolarity in asia, india - china relations, south asian geopolitics

Introduction

The rise of China as an economic and military power has led to increasing global speculation about its impact on regional stability, particularly in South Asia. India, as the dominant power in the region, faces a complex relationship with China that oscillates between cooperation and conflict. The historical context of the 1962 war, border disputes and economic competition contribute to an enduring rivalry. In contrast to the classical thucydidean model, which assumes inevitable military confrontation between a rising and an established power, India and China exhibit patterns of strategic competition, economic engagement and diplomatic hedging that suggest alternative pathways.

Historical Context and the Genesis of Rivalry

The Sino-Indian Rivalry has deep historical roots. Following India's independence in 1947 and the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949, the two nations initially sought solidarity as post colonial states. However the 1962 Sino-Indian war revealed strategic divergences. Scholars like Tanvi Madan (2020) argue that differing political ideologies and border claims solidified mutual distrust. The McMahon Line, Tibet and the role of Pakistan further complicate bilateral relations. The 21st century competition is thus an extension of this historical rivalry, exacerbated by economic and military expansion.



Theoretical Framework of the Thucydides Trap

The thucydides trap, derived from thucydides account of the Peloponnesian war, posits that when a rising power threatens to displace an existing hegemony, war becomes likely. Graham Allison's application of this concept to U.S – CHINA relations has sparked the debate on whether the framework applies to India-China dynamics. Applying the theory, when a rising power China threatened an established power India in the South Asian context, the likelihood of war increases. However this framework must be critically evaluated in the Indo-Chinese case. Unlike the US China rivalry, where power transition is global, India and China are regional powers with complex interdependencies.

Re-assessing the Determinism of the Thucydides Trap

India – China rivalry is often depicted as a class of Titans drive and by the fear of falling into the inevitable Trap of conflict as outlined by Thucydides. However when viewed through the prism of ancient Asian strategic traditions the rivalry transforms into a sophisticated theatre of strategic maneuvering. Here conflict is not an inexorable conclusion but one possible outcome among many – a result of choices made amid historical legacies and pragmatic statecraft. The concept of the Thucydides trap emerged from the study of ancient Greek conflicts and has been popularised to warn against the perils of rapid power shifts. In its simplest formulation it wants that when a rising power challenges an established one, war is almost inevitable. While this perspective finds some resonance in the current US – China dynamics applying it to the India- China context raises critical questions. Both nations are not newcomers on the global stage, they are heirs to long histories of Empire, Statecraft and diplomacy. Their strategic culture has evolved over millennia embedding a preference for indirect conflict resolution and long term maneuvering.

Civilizational Underpinning: A Comparative Analysis

At the heart of this alternative view is two monumental texts : Kautilya Arthashastra and Sun Tzu's Art of war. Kautilya's treatise written in the

context of ancient Indian statecraft advocates for a mix of covert operations, economic warfare and diplomatic alliances. It underscores the importance of pragmatic statecraft where the objectives is to balance power without necessarily resorting to open warfare. In contrast, Sun Tzu's Art of war, which has informed chinese military and political strategy for centuries, emphasizes the importance of deception, psychological warfare and the minimisation of conflicts costs through strategy rather than brute force. These strategic philosophies suggest that both India and China are predisposed to methods that favor measured responses and a kind of “ strategic ballet” – a series of moves that involve tactical containment and subtle influence rather than a head on collision. This divergence from the binary nature of Western power struggles explains why the thucydides trap might not nearly apply to their rivalry.

Geopolitical and Territorial Dynamics

A significant facet of India-China rivalry is its geographical complexity. The two nations share a long and often disputed border, stretching across the challenging terrain of the Himalayas. Here, physical geography becomes both a battleground and a natural deterrent. In the regions like Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh occasional border skirmishes have underscored the underlying tensions. However these incidents rarely escalate to full scale war – a testament to the influence of ancient strategic doctrines that favor controlled confrontation.

China's Strategic investments in the region, notably through projects in Tibet and infrastructure initiatives along disputed borders are complemented by India's own efforts to reinforce its frontiers through road construction and military modernisation. This a continuous cycle of escalation and de-escalation exemplifies a form of controlled competition – one in which both nations are acutely aware of the costs of an all-out war. The Himalayas, in this context, serve not only as a physical barrier but also as a symbol of the enduring strategic patience that characterises this rivalry.

Economic Interdependence and Strategic Leverage

Despite persistent political and military tensions, Economic ties between India and China remain



right. China is one of India's largest trading partners, providing essential components ranging from consumer electronics to industrial machinery. This interdependence complicates any narrative that anticipated an inevitable clash. Economic engagements serve as a double edged sword; they provide leverage, they also act as a moderating influence, discouraging both sides from pursuing overly aggressive policies that could disrupt trade and economic stability. Moreover India's pursuit of *Atmanirbhar Bharat* illustrates its commitment to reducing dependency on Chinese imports, yet the process is incremental. Both nations have learned that economic decoupling is neither swift nor simple. In an era of globalised supply chains, economic interdependence has become a strategic asset, forcing both countries to tread carefully. This complex economic relationship is emblematic of a broader civilizational approach to conflict management – a balance between asserting national interests and preserving long term mutual benefit.

Soft Power and Ideological Dimensions

Beyond the realms of military and economic strategy lies the domain of soft power – a subtle but potent tool in shaping perceptions and cultural influence. India and China aren't just competitors in the physical or economic domains but they are also engaged in a contest for cultural and ideological supremacy. India's democratic ideals, vibrant media and the global appeal of Bollywood stand in contrast to China's tightly controlled narrative and its efforts to project stability and unity through state – sponsored media.

Cultural diplomacy plays a significant role in this rivalry. India leverages its historical legacy as the birthplace of major religions and philosophies, promoting a message of pluralism and diversity. In contrast, China projects its ancient cultural heritage and modern achievements as evidence of a uniquely successful model of state led development. In regions like southeast Asia and Africa, where both countries vie for influence, these

Cultural narratives are critical because they provide soft power advantages that can either exacerbate or mitigate Geopolitical tensions depending on the prevailing sentiment.

Strategic Alliances and Regional Multipolarity

A further nuance in the India – China relationship is the presence of a broader regional multipolarity. Unlike the cold war era binary division the current Asian Geopolitical landscape features multiple influential actors such as Japan, ASEAN countries and Russia. India's strategic alignment with the Quad comprising US, JAPAN and AUSTRALIA and its deepening partnerships with various regional neighbours serve as counterbalances to China's expansive economic and infrastructural initiatives such as the Belt and Road initiative. These alliances underscore that the India- China rivalry is embedded within a larger more complex regional framework. They illustrate how strategic partnerships can serve both deterrents to conflicts and as vehicles for economic cooperation. The presence of multiple centres of power dilutes the binary opposition that the thucydides trap assumes, suggesting instead a more nuanced interplay of interests and strategies.

The Role of National Identity and Historical Narratives

National identity and Historical narratives further complicate the competitive landscape between India and China. Both nations have a deep seated sense of pride in their ancient civilizations, and this pride translates into contemporary policy debates. For China, the narrative of a "century of humiliation" and the subsequent rise to global prominence underscored its assertive foreign policy. For India, the legacy of colonial subjugation and the struggle for independence shapes its cautious yet assertive stance on national sovereignty. These historical memories inform modern strategic calculations, influencing how each side perceives its adversary and negotiates its position in the global arena.

The Interplay of these narratives ensures that both countries remain vigilant and responsive. Yet it also created a buffer against rapid escalation – each side is mindful that their actions aren't viewed only through the lens of immediate strategic interests but also through the longer arc of national history. This awareness has fostered a preference for measured responses and calculated restraint.



Controlled Competition : The Dynamics of a Strategic Dance

In analysing the India – China rivalry, one can liken it to a carefully choreographed dance. Both nations engage in a controlled competition where moves add deliberate and missteps could trigger disproportionate consequences. Occasional border standoffs, economic sanctions and diplomatic protests are part of a continuous cycle of signalling rather than a prelude to outright war. This pattern of engagement is reflective of a broader strategic culture that values long-term stability over short-term gains.

In this context, strategic containment becomes a tool not just of military might but also of diplomatic fitness. Each border incident or economic measure is calibrated to send a message while avoiding the escalation that would disrupt the delicate balance. This strategic dance is underpinned by an understanding that both nations have much to lose in a direct confrontation- a reality that encourages both restraint and innovation in policy.

Implications for Global Power Transitions

The reinterpretation of the rivalry has profound implications for global power transitions. By moving away from the deterministic view of the Thucydides trap, policymakers and scholars are encouraged to look beyond simplistic predictions of inevitable conflict. Instead, they must consider the intricate interplay of history, culture, economics and regional alliances that shape contemporary Geo-politics. This more nuanced approach can inform strategies that not only prevent conflict but also foster stability in a multipolar world.

In rethinking power transitions in Asia, it becomes clear that the traditional metrics of military expenditure and territorial control are insufficient. Instead, a comprehensive assessment must include economic interdependencies, cultural influences and the role of strategic alliances. Such an approach can better capture the complexity of the modern international system – where multiple forms of power interact in unexpected ways, and where the legacy of ancient statecraft continues to influence modern policy decisions.

Theatre of Coexistence : An Alternative Model ?

Instead of a deterministic march toward war, India-China rivalry reflects a structured theatre of competition where both powers seek to maximize influence while avoiding full scale war. Economic interdependence, cultural exchanges and regional alliances will continue to act as stabilizing factors even as border disputes and strategic competitions persist. Both nations steeped in traditions that favor subtlety over spectacle, appear committed to a mode of engagement that prioritises long-term stability over short-term victories. The challenge lies in channeling rivalry into constructive competition – where innovation, economic growth and cultural diplomacy replace the rhetoric of inevitable conflict. As new global challenges emerge from climate change to cyber warfare, the need for collaborative frameworks becomes even more pressing. In this evolving landscape, the ability to learn from historical wisdom and adapt to new realities will determine whether the India-China dynamics becomes a model of strategic coexistence or a cautionary tale of missed opportunities.

Conclusion

Rethinking the thucydides trap in the context of India-China rivalry reveals a far more intricate and layered dynamic than traditional western narratives suggest. Rather than being locked into an inevitable path to war, these two civilizations engage in a prolonged, controlled strategic dance that leverages centuries old wisdom alongside modern statecraft. Through a balanced interplay of military posturing, economic interdependence, soft power influence and regional alliances, India and China demonstrate that conflict need not be an inexorable outcome of rising power.

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