

Asymmetrical Threat Perceptions in India–China Relations by Tien-sze Fang, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 266, INR 795

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Tien-sze Fang's *Asymmetrical Threat Perceptions in India–China Relations* makes a comparative study of the threat perceptions of the two countries vis-à-vis each other. The book endorses the view that although both the countries have security concerns from each other, the threat perception in India is far more acute than in China. This asymmetry defines the relations between the two countries. Treating historical enmity 'as a fixed source of perceived threat', Fang considers the 1962 border war between the two countries as 'a fixed' and 'the main source of India's perceived threat from China'. Fang argues that such a threat perception is not easily erased. Historical enmity keeps raising its head and shapes and reshapes threat perceptions in various ways. It would be interesting to study as to how the memories of the war have shaped India's threat perception over the decades since 1962.

Fang is right in as much that China's rise has led to renewed evocations of the 1962 war in the Indian strategic intellectual space. According to Fang, the deepened engagement and interaction between the two states is not likely to result in shared identity. Here, China, which has a lower threat perception because of its greater confidence and international status, is reluctant to share an identity with India. China's reservations about recognising India as a nuclear power bear out this point. Further,

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he believes that India's nuclear capabilities address its concerns about asymmetry only to a limited extent. Moreover, given its overall capability constraints, India still prefers to stay away from any hard-balancing initiatives targeted against China. It prefers a soft balancing, which it believes to be more rational and beneficial. Finally, Fang also views India as a challenger which is not satisfied with the status quo because it implies a status quo in terms of power asymmetry, which contributes to its insecurity vis-à-vis China. He seems to hold the view that India's threat perception might have a destabilising effect on bilateral relations as it strives to remove the asymmetry. The author locates all these points and arguments within the nuclear dimension of India–China relations, the Tibet issue, the boundary dispute and the regional and global contexts.

Fang argues that countering the perceived Chinese nuclear threat was one of the major motivations behind India's nuclear programme, whereas China's nuclear threat perception was shaped by the United States and the Soviet Union. India was not a consideration for China's nuclear programme, which was started during the heyday of India–China friendship in the mid-1950s. He maintains that India may not as such be worried that China poses a nuclear threat, but it has always believed that nuclear blackmail by China in a 1962 war-type exigency is a possibility. On the other hand, India's nuclear weapons hardly translate into any military–security concerns for China. They only raise some political concerns. China has taken note of the fact that nuclear capability has contributed to India's confidence and international standing. It has objection to India citing the China threat to justify its nuclear programme. These observations by Fang are valid. However, China has not been oblivious to India's nuclear programme. Its contribution to Pakistan's nuclear weapon programme could be interpreted as part of its nuclear strategy to offset India's nuclear weapons capabilities.

Fang highlights India's restrained approach on the Tibet issue as yet another example of India's acceptance of the adverse power asymmetry in its relations with China. He is of the view that India has been conscious that it cannot make any impact in Tibet right from the time of Nehru. With the exception of allowing the Tibetan Government in Exile (TGIE) to function in India or then Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran's visit to Dharamshala in 2003, India has been reluctant to make Tibet an issue. But it has also not endorsed China's claim over Tibet in the manner that China wants it to. It has not accepted Tibet as an 'alienable' part of China. With some semantic changes overtime, it has only accepted Tibet

as an autonomous part of China. On the other hand, although the Dalai Lama's presence in India keeps China somewhat suspicious of India's intentions, its principal political and security concerns for Tibet, again, are not related to India. It is rather more concerned about any likelihood of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan movement receiving support from the US. India may have been reluctant to play the Tibet card due to capability constraints, as Fang maintains, or because of its policy of non-interference, as many Indians would argue. However, the importance of India in the Tibet issue and Tibet in India–China relations cannot be over-emphasised. Despite Chinese claims—and expectations—that the Tibetan movement would collapse after the demise of the 14th Dalai Lama, there is no certainty as to what would happen in the post-Dalai Lama scenario. The asymmetrical threat perception in the case of Tibet is essentially between the Tibetans and China. China feels vulnerable in Tibet; the region remains far from being pacified, and poses a challenge to the Communist Party.

China's claim to Tawang in India's Arunachal Pradesh, which it started raking up mainly from 2000 onwards, shows that there is a strong linkage between the border dispute between India and China and the Tibet issue, at least in the eastern sector. It is perceived that the reason for China claiming Tawang is to strengthen its pro-Tibet and pro-Buddhist credentials before the Tibetans. In fact, the border dispute, China's anxiety in Tibet and suspicions about India, and China–Pakistan relations, all have a connection. China's insecurity in Tibet affects India–China relations, and brings Pakistan to put India under strategic pressure. For India, 'Tibet' is leverage, whether used or unused, weak or strong. Any hypothetical internationalisation of the Tibetan issue will require crucial Indian support. Thus, considering India's importance, China has time and again sought reassurances from India during times of disturbance and unrest in Tibet—for example, in the 1950s and in the late 1980s. Moreover, Tibet's importance for India has gone beyond the political nature of the long-standing Tibet issue. Fang's discussion on Tibet would have been richer had he discussed issues such as China's massive infrastructure build-up, particularly military, in Tibet and environmental concerns emanating from China's actions in Tibet, such as damming of Brahmaputra River and its reported plans for the diversion of the river. These are the issues relating to Tibet which are shaping India's security perception at present, and where India's concerns regarding asymmetry are more noticeable.

Fang delineates the various ways in which the two countries have maintained peace and tranquility on the border. He analyses the ongoing India–China boundary talks by drawing his inferences from the material available in the public domain. According to Fang, the asymmetry in this respect is that while India seeks an early resolution, China is confident enough to not be overly anxious for an early resolution. Fang posits that China does not view an unsettled border as a security concern. He notes that although till the late 1990s India too was reconciled that the solution of the boundary dispute was a long-term prospect, the worsening security situation on its western border changed its perspective. India started looking for an early solution of the border problem because it would enable it to be better prepared on the western side. This seems a reasonably convincing argument. However, from the Chinese standpoint, it could well be argued that that China would also benefit from an early settlement as it would help China become more self-reassured in Tibet. Besides, India might have been relatively more vocal about the boundary dispute resolution. However, this persistence can be taken either as India's impatience or a means for building pressure on China. Thus, it is difficult to determine which of the two countries is in greater hurry to resolve the dispute.

Furthermore, given India's growing military capabilities and improved infrastructure in the Himalayan border region, this entire argument of an asymmetrical threat perception between India and China needs to be looked at again. The two military stand-offs—first, on the eve of Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India in 2013; and then, during President Xi Jinping's India visit in 2014—following the Chinese military intrusion into the Indian side of the border could be construed as a Chinese reaction to India's growing capabilities and improved infrastructure, which seems to have bolstered India's will to engage.

Fang has highlighted the simultaneous cooperation and competition between India and China in South Asia, South-East Asia and Central Asia. The underlying assumption of his argument is that India–China interactions in the region are marked by India's concerns vis-à-vis China. India views China's relations with its South Asian neighbours with suspicion and as being against India. Fang maintains that while this was true during the Cold War era, China has sought to maintain a distance from South Asian affairs in the post-Cold War period, giving primacy to its economic interest in the region, and that it has maintained a balanced position between India and Pakistan. He underscores that India's approach

towards China in the regional context is meant for counter-balancing China. He argues that the defence component of India's Look East policy is guided by a convergence of the interests of India and South-East Asian countries' vis-à-vis China.

However, China's balanced position that Fang mentions in the context of the contentious issues between India and Pakistan is, at best, a formally balanced position. While China has taken a formally neutral stand on the Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan, it has always propped up Pakistan in diplomatic or military showdowns between India and Pakistan, by issuing goodwill diplomatic statements for Pakistan and by supplying arms to it. China's presence in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) has emerged as a new issue between India and China. China's proposed massive commercial presence in PoK in the proposed China–Pakistan Economic Corridor as per China's One Belt, One Road vision would render China's formal neutrality over the Kashmir issue irrelevant. China has gone ahead with the proposal, setting aside India's objections. Besides, 2009 onwards, China has blocked many Indian moves to initiate United Nations sanctions against Pakistan-based terrorists responsible for the terrorist acts in India. The latest case in point is the Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhavi case. This has been done to save Pakistan from international embarrassment and to protect its international standing—aims that run counter to India's security objectives. Thus, it is difficult to say whether China has truly withdrawn from the region's security strategic scenario.

In the global context, Fang emphasises that while the deepening India–US strategic partnership is viewed with concern by China, India has its own reservations about playing second fiddle to the US. Therefore, India continues to uphold its anti-hegemony stand by maintaining equidistance from both the US and China. It is unlikely that India would become part of any anti-China plank. There is no contention against this argument. However, more recently, India's intensified interaction and engagement with countries such as Japan and Vietnam has come as a significant development in Asia-Pacific strategic situation. The regional countries' express expectations from India to become more engaged in the region and play an active and constructive role in the regional maritime territorial disputes involving China, pointing to India's enhanced stature that is independent of a pro-US or pro-China binary.

Fang's book is a comprehensive and impressive study. The narrative is insightful, detailed and deals with the various dimensions and sub-dimensions of the relationship. It should be a recommended reading for

those interested in India–China relations. This review is focused on the core theme of the book, that is, the asymmetry of threat perception in India–China relations. While the core assumptions on this count can be upheld, the review underlines the need for studying the asymmetry in a little more nuanced manner and in the light of latest developments in bilateral relations. Finally, as the discussed asymmetry comes from the power differential, it would have been appropriate if the book had included a chapter on this issue, which would have provided greater clarity about the perceived asymmetry.