

Resources, rising powers and international security

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Energy security and the rise of China and India are two important elements of the current international discourse. Yet, we have barely begun to understand the full import of the intersection between the two issues. To be sure, there is greater recognition today of the contribution of economic growth in China and India to world oil prices and the role of the two Asian economies in managing worldwide carbon emissions. There is even exaggerated talk of resource wars among the world's great powers, old and new. This paper raises some broader questions on the tension between the two Asian giants' quest for energy security and the presumed Western consensus on the organising principles of international security. The well-being of the nearly two and a half billion people living in China and India now depends on their access to natural resources, not just oil and coal but also minerals and food, beyond their borders. Even a modest level of prosperity in China and India is bound to have a massive effect on the availability of resources, the nature of their use, and their global consequences. The paper begins with an assessment of the unfolding changes in the foreign policies of China and India amid the new imperatives of economic growth and resource security. The second section focuses on the apparent tension between the Chinese and Indian emphases on absolute territorial sovereignty and the Western proposals on 'humanitarian intervention' and the 'responsibility to protect'. The third section concludes with a call for a new bargain between the West on the one hand, and China and India on the other that will facilitate the integration of Beijing and New Delhi as responsible partners in the management of global resource security.

China and India: From third worldism to neo-colonialism?

As China and India "go out" in a determined quest for equity oil and mineral assets in lands far from its own shores, they are beginning to confront charges of "neo-colonialism". For the moment, Beijing is a larger target of criticism than New Delhi. China has been far more aggressive than India in pursuing its economic interests around the world. Western critics, not

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entirely accurately, argue that the hunger for resources in China and India and their incipient political rivalry is akin to the scramble for Africa among rival European colonial powers in the 19th century. Irrespective of the analogy, India is certainly competing with China for oil and mineral resources in Africa. New Delhi might be way behind Beijing; but it is on the same road. More importantly their rising dependence on energy and mineral resources in the developing world has often put them at odds with the Western powers.

International financial institutions and major aid donors for Africa have been critical of Chinese and Indian economic policies towards Africa. They insist that Beijing and New Delhi should not repeat the mistakes of the US and the West in bank-rolling for decades such unsavoury regimes as that of Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire. While their aid policies are completely tied to national interest, India and China insist that they are providing new economic options for the rest of the developing world. They suggest that much of the Western criticism is motivated by the fear of losing the dominant positions of influence in Africa, Latin America and Asia. While growing demand for resources in China and India has lifted the economies of the developing world, Western critics are apprehensive that the greater flow of resources will accentuate rather than ameliorate conflict in the third world.

After decades of seeing themselves as victims of imperialism, China and India will find the tag of neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism shocking, if not distasteful. Yet New Delhi, like Beijing, must confront a new reality. The greater their economic and political capacity to influence outcomes elsewhere in the world, the stronger will be international scrutiny of their policies. Equally important is the need to acknowledge that the foreign policies of China and India towards the developing world—whose resources and markets the two rising powers badly need—are undergoing a profound transformation. As high growth rates propel China and India, the two Asian giants are being compelled to design foreign policies for large economies that no longer are self-sufficient. Their rhetoric might be that of the Third World, but Chinese and Indian foreign policies could increasingly look like those of great powers, especially in the defence of the new economic interests beyond their borders.

As their dependence on imported oil and mineral resources expands rapidly in the coming years, China and India, although they are loath to admit this, will be under pressure to defend these interests through the time-tested means employed by great powers. These include large volumes of economic assistance, subsidising domestic capital in capturing export markets, supporting friendly governments, and selling arms to such regimes which might use them against their internal and regional adversaries. In extremis, this might even involve sending troops to preserve order and stability to defend “vital” national interests.

The criticism of China and India is sharpest for supporting the governments in Sudan and Myanmar, both of whom are facing massive international criticism for their internal repression. Beijing and New Delhi, with their huge investments in Sudan's oil fields, are unwilling to sacrifice their energy interests to compel Khartoum to change its behaviour. The same is true in Myanmar, where both countries are competing for influence. Beijing and New Delhi will point out that

these are not the only instances where major powers have elevated “national interests” above presumed “international principles”. They cite the long record of US policy of self-interest towards the oil-rich Persian Gulf. China and India, however, cannot have it both ways. Of pretending injured innocence at accusations of neo-colonialism on the one hand and asserting that other powers do the same. They will need to find a measure of balance interests and principles.

Sovereignty and non-intervention

Although India is the world’s largest democracy and China has emerged as the world’s most powerful non-democracy, their approaches to conflicts within the developing world seem broadly similar. Both of them are deeply wary of the doctrines of humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect. They are unwilling, at the moment, to endorse these as necessary principles to deal with contemporary international security challenges. Given their interests in cultivating ruling regimes for access to raw materials, China and India seem to prefer the virtues of “regime stability” and reluctant to confront the risks of “regime change”.

Do values—such as liberal democracy which the Indian elites cherish so deeply at home—have any relevance for the conduct of its foreign policy? Do China’s differing political values mean Beijing can never be a credible partner in dealing with the range of new security threats that demand international coercion of recalcitrant states? This apparent contradiction between the current Western notions of ordering international security on the one hand and the Chinese and Indian notions of sovereignty on the other, however, can easily be over-determined.

While the Chinese and Indian multilateralists do sound the same when defending the notion of “absolute sovereignty”, India’s diplomatic practice tells a very different story. Within the Subcontinent and its environs, which is India’s presumed sphere of influence; New Delhi has a record of using force beyond its borders. Long before “humanitarian intervention” became international fashion, India chose to intervene in East Pakistan to end a genocide there by the Pakistani Army. India’s successful creation of Bangladesh occurred in the face of opposition to the U.S. but also the United Nations Security Council and the UN General Assembly. India also used force, unsuccessfully, in Sri Lanka in the late 1980s to defend the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka as well as protect the political rights of the Tamil minority there. More recently, India intervened, politically, to support the pro-democracy forces in Nepal.

India’s attitude to non-intervention has always had two distinctive elements to it. At the global level, it had sought to oppose interventions by the great powers which could set the precedent for potential interventions against itself. This was a weak nation fearful of other powers undermining its territorial integrity. Within its own neighbourhood, however, India’s policy had mirrored those of Western powers choosing to intervene when its interests or principles demanded so. Beyond its own region, India has contributed actively in the past to United Nations Peacekeeping - a form of collective intervention by the international system. China, too, has had a record of promoting political change beyond its borders. It is also deeply fearful of Western interventions against it. After prolonged opposition to international peacekeeping operations, China has now begun to actively participate in them. There are good reasons to believe that the positions of China and India on intervention would evolve in the coming years.

Given their own rising stakes in access to resources, China and India might not be entirely averse to either unilateral or multilateral interventions in future to defend their interests. After all the principal objective of China and India is to sustain the high growth rates and not the permanent upholding of the principle of non-intervention. As defensive powers, China and India, until now have found it useful to cite the principle of non-intervention. As China and India generate more advanced conventional military capabilities, including the development of expeditionary forces, they will surely begin to debate the merits of a more interventionist policy. If and when they arrive at that juncture, the reaction of the western powers could be a lot more alarmist than their current criticism of their policies of non-intervention. Nor is there a reason to believe that the current Chinese and Indian preference for order over justice in resource-rich developing countries will be an enduring one. Decision-makers in both Beijing and New Delhi have begun to grapple with the inevitable contradiction between their own short-term interests in regime stability and the longer-term interests in promoting a sustainable environment for ensuring adequate supply of raw materials from beyond the borders. They are also not unaware of the consequences of taking sides in civil wars and internal conflicts in developing countries.

China and India are keen to engage the West and look beyond the false contradiction between intervention and sovereignty, and regime stability and regime change. The real challenge lies in bringing the debate on when, where and how to intervene in internal conflicts. Neither the European belief in empowering a super-sovereign United Nations to involve itself in unlimited interventions, nor the muscular American idea of unilateral intervention has proved to be effective. The real questions before the international community are, how China and India can be encouraged to define their resource security in more broader terms and how they can be drawn into a more effective international approach to conflict resolution within developing countries. That would require fundamental changes in the current attitudes of the West as well as those of China and India.

From free riders to stakeholders

In the last few years it has become fashionable to demand that China and India prove they are “stakeholders” in the international system. As they begin to influence resource security issues, there is a growing Western resentment that China and India are acting as “free riders” who take advantage of the international system without paying for its construction or maintenance. Beijing and New Delhi, however, find this is part of a historic pattern of condescension from the old powers towards the rising ones. China and India, from their own enlightened self interest, need to go beyond criticising Western hypocrisy on resource security. They need to go beyond the dearly held notions of strategic autonomy and accept their new international responsibilities.

Great powers, defined as those who enjoy global economic, political and military reach, do not talk about autonomy. In the absence of world government, it is the function of great powers to construct and sustain a measure of order in international affairs. Put another way, great powers define rules for the rest. Most states tend to accept the rules, given the knowledge that a rule-based order serves their interests better than anarchy. It is only states with national ambitions to improve their relative power position which insist that they will not let the international system constrain their freedom of action and pay the costs for defiance.

The emphasis on strategic autonomy was natural for China and India which emerged out of colonial rule in the middle of the last century. Yet the founders of the two nations have talked about their manifest destiny on the world stage. As weak but ambitious states, China and India have had a strong desire to prevent other powers from limiting their own room for manoeuvre. Therefore, they have often refused to abide by rules they considered discriminatory or unequal. Six decades later, as two of the world's largest economies, China and India have the potential to shape the international system. They must now learn to share the costs of managing it rather than merely avoiding the discipline of an existing set of rules.

The West, on the other hand, will be extremely unrealistic to assume that rising China and India will simply abandon the imperatives of economic growth and fall in line. Attempts at coercion, such as holding the Olympics hostage to Darfur, or demanding China and India give up their economic interests in Myanmar, will reinforce cynicism rather than promote responsibility in Beijing and New Delhi. On a whole range of issues - from devising better market mechanisms for resource security to defining new norms on when and where to intervene, and from devising a collective mechanism to limiting carbon emissions to finding a balance between regime stability and regime change - we need a new engagement between the West and Asia's rising powers to find common ground. There is nothing to suggest that the West has all the answers for these problems and that China and India merely need to defer to the current conventional wisdom.