

INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS FROM SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

India and China rivalry in recent years attributed to structural reasons like border dispute, overlapping of sphere of influence in south Asia, India's alliance with western countries etc. However, these structural reasons or realism is inadequate, as they can't explain a shift from cooperation to confrontation and vice versa in last 75 years. Realism fails to incorporate values, norms, discourse in analysis. This paper argues that India China relations can be explained from Social Constructivist perspective. Self-identities, identification of others, construction of anarchy, norms, value pREFERENCES, their strategic culture and discursive power shapes their relationship. India and China's civilisational values, their colonial history and experiences create their world view. India's identity as a Vishwa guru or moral leader, and Chinese identity as a middle kingdom shape its conception of China led Asian order. This paper concludes that mutual attempt to reshape the discourse, trust building activities can help rebuilding their relationship.

KEYWORDS: Social Constructivism, Structural realism, Discourse, Identities

INTRODUCTION

There is a debate in international relations about what determines the action of the state. Classical realist scholars like Morgenthau argues that international politics is all about the power. Neo-realism blames it on the structure of global politics which is anarchy. Structural realism fails to explain relationship, as same structure results in conflict and cooperation between two countries at different time period. For instance, India and China had cooperative relationship in 1990s and after 2010 relationship deteriorated with same structure. Structural realism ignores the role of norms, values, narratives, discourse etc. India having confrontational relationship with China, from a neo-liberal perspective, should have exhibited military alliance with western countries from balance of power logic, but India instead choose strategic autonomy(Paul, 2018). Similarly, India leaders from Nehru to Narendra Modi and their perception of China played a role in shaping relationship which structuralism is insufficient to explain.

India China rivalry is often attributed to the structural aspect of their relationship such as disputed borders, collision of sphere of influence in South Asia, interest in Indian Ocean region. From the structural theorist perspective, it is often argued that agents including political leaders, military establishments have little choice to deviate from structural aspects. From a social constructivist perspective, the agent and structure shape each other, through the actions and interaction of agents with each

other (Hopf, 1998). For instance, the border dispute strengthens due to practices like military patrolling, building border infrastructures, deploying military hardware along the borders. Social Constructivism which emphasizes ideas, historical legacy, past memories, identities shapes relationship. This research paper analyse how own identity and others identification, construction of anarchy, norms, value preferences, their strategic culture and discursive power shapes their relationship.

SELF-IDENTITY

Identity of an actor is its own construct. That identity defines the interest of actor i.e what the actor wants while it engages with other actors(Hopf, 1998). As the identity changes, so does the interest. In the 1950's India and China had their identity as newly formed states just came out from the claws of colonial power. Their interest of forging friendship in 1950's including Panchasheel Agreement comes from their identity. For China period, before 1949 was century of humiliation in hands of colonial masters whereas for India, independence from Britishers was hard won freedom. This made both countries sensitive and cautious towards territorial integrity, triggering conflict over borders. India and China identify themselves as 'responsible Asian power' which come from their identity as a civilisational state.

Both India and China consider them as civilization state and natural contender of global leader. China consider itself as a "middle kingdom"(Blum & Jensen, 2017) with hierarchical

order with China at the top, whereas India consider itself as a spiritual leader of the world. China due to its self-image seek to build a China centric order in Asia whereas India wants to build a multipolar order in same region. In the self-image of China is due to combination of Confucian tradition and realism, which results into China perception of itself a manager of Asian affairs, and demand obedience from India in Asia (DODH, 2021). This hierarchical conception of China restrict itself to view India as a nation having equal status. India's own civilisational identity as peaceful country dictated policies towards China in these times. Both India and China are status seeking states. Konwer (2011) argues that during bilateral interaction, both countries try to uphold their status and respect as a civilisational state.

Identification of other state plays a significant role in shaping the relationship (Paul, 2018). 1962 gave India a "psychological scar" (Pant, 2014), creating a perception of China as a nation that cannot be trusted. Post 1962, India perceived China as a communist state having expansionist tendencies. As a result, India shifted its policy from Nehru's idealism to realism, which is still continuing after 60 years of war. Every border skirmish is look from lens of 1962 war, that India is no longer an ill-prepared nation of 1962 and India must demonstrate its improved military capability. (Pathak, n.d.). India consider China as a primary threat after border standoffs, and have a perception of China as a revisionist power. India perceives Chinese attempt of build infrastructure such as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as String of pearls or an attempt of strategically encircling India.

CONSTRUCTION OF ANARCHY

Alexander Wendt argues that "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt, 1992). States behave in different manner in the condition of anarchy which depends how they perceive each other. For instance, India had a border dispute with China and Bangladesh, India however settled its border dispute with Bangladesh by exchange of enclaves, but not with China due to negative perception. In similar way, China have settled land border with all its neighbours except India. After 1988 Rajeev Gandhi visit to China, both countries entered into a stable relations even in the condition of anarchy for almost two decade, which is broken after 2008 after series of border conflicts.

According to Social Constructivist perspective, absence of central authority to manage relationship to manage India China conflict is their own creation. Decades of conflict over the border have created a construct that it can't be manage through involvement of international agencies and international laws. Zero Sum game and anarchy like situation between India and China is because of choices these two nations made in the history such as 1962 war (Wendt, 1992). Anarchy can be do

away with informal talk where stakes are low, as they happen in Wuhan and in Mamallapuram (Panda, 2019).

DETERMINING THE NORMS

The idea of appropriateness is also a social construct. The types and degree of actions particularly during the conflict is driven states perception of acceptability. Actions the state are driven by "logic of appropriateness" (Steele & Heinze, 2020) rather than pragmatism. For instance, India had a rich cultural heritage of Buddhism and Jainism who propagated the norm of peace and mutual coexistence. Panchasheel agreement between India and China of 1954 is the reflection of India's ethos. Principles of mutual respect, non-aggression, non-interference became foundational norms of their relationship in 1950s. Both countries are holding the norm not to use military equipment in case of conflict which acts as informal norm. For example, in recent Galwan conflict, both states shown restrain while using the force. Wuhan Summit in 2018 held these principles during informal meetings.

Norm of Asian solidarity and common resistance against neo-colonialism of both India and China results into development of partnership in the forms like BRICS and SCO (Bhatiya, 2020). For the same reason, India hesitant to become a part of US led alliance against China. Norms also resulted in conflict. India allowed political asylum to Dalai Lama as a humanitarian norm, and as obligation towards a spiritual leader which resulted in conflict with China for whom norm of non-interference is a priority (Chatterjee Miller, 2013). Panda and Baruah (2019) argues that India and China relationship happens in the context of their Asian Identity. At times they conflict or cooperate, but context remains the same. Blackwill and Tellis (2015) argues that their opposition to western hegemony also stems from norm of 'Asia for Asian'. Both oppose dependency on western countries and try to assert their voice as developing Asian nation due to such norms.

Both India and China have a normative tradition of realism. In India, 'Arthashastra' was written by Kautilya propagates realists' notions, similarly in 'Art of War' written by Sun Tzu display harsh realities of power politics. This duality in norms is also reflected in their contemporary relationship. Panda and Baruah (2019) argues that cooperative aspect of their relationship is not a normative choice but a tactical method to coexist. In the eye of public, both countries display their desire for cooperation, but they are deeply suspicious of each other's motives.

STRATEGIC CULTURE

Policy makers and perception towards other country is shaped by their strategic culture. This culture has two dimensions, first to view own self as peaceful nation and second,

to view other as an aggressor (Paul, 2018). China has dual strategic culture, one influenced by Confucian tradition influenced by non-violent means to secure goals, and other by realpolitik, in recent times, it is dominated by realpolitik with use of military is seen as effective way to resolve border dispute (Johnson, 2009). China takes inspiration from Sun Tzu, to subdue the enemy without fighting, using economy and psychological tools to weaken the enemy (Micciche, 2021). China uses dumping of low cost goods in India to increase its export and weaken Indian economy. Similar Chinese tactics is found in south Asia to win allies by providing infrastructure funds. Sun Tzu's idea of warfare through deception can be applied to the Himalayan border disputes, where China use psychological pressure and strategic maneuvering to unsettle India thus by employing incremental troop deployments, China seeks to gradually alter the situation on the ground and create irreversible realities along the border without triggering a full-scale conflict (Ghosh, 2024).

Both India and China sought strategic autonomy in their foreign policy. India's strategic culture comes from Nehruvian ideas of non-alignment and mutual coexistence. India during cold war followed Non-Alignment Movement, China though a communist country distanced itself from USSR after 1972. India opposes to Chinese initiative like Belt and Road Initiative avoiding joining any western alliance in the present times prioritising strategic autonomy. Indurthy (2016) argues that India and China form partnership in climate change forums, economic platforms to maintain their autonomy from great powers. The choice for autonomy comes from their colonial past and movement for self-reliance.

Panda and Baruah (2019) argues that China has a strategic culture of long-term planning to achieve its objective along with situational pragmatism. China is not driven by events but plans to create a favourable environment in long term. In the border dispute with India, China chooses to maintain ambiguity over the border instead of clarification, thus sustaining the tensions for long period of time. This strategy allows China to buy time until regional and global politics goes in their favour to take appropriate actions. China for its long-term advantage tries to build a stable relationship with India but on unequal terms maintaining hierarchy in Asian politics in long term.

DISCURSIVE POWER

Discursive power shapes ideas and defines meaning. Both India and China are status seeking nations (Paul, 2018). Both have great power aspirations in regional and global politics which create a friction between them. India's aspiration to become a 'Vishwa Guru' and China's 'Middle Kingdom syndrome' is a social construct. The influence of discursive power can be seen in the ways each country frames the other's

regional actions, thereby reinforcing enduring patterns of mistrust and antagonism (Hopf, 1998). Indian and Western commentators have framed China's development of ports such as Gwadar and Hambantota as part of a broader narrative of strategic encirclement, commonly referred to as the "string of pearls" whereas, China seeks to counter such interpretations by advancing an alternative discursive framework, portraying the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a geoeconomic project grounded in cooperation and the construction of a community of shared destiny oriented toward mutual development (Bajpai et al., 2020).

Discursive power also helps to mitigate conflict. There is no nuclear arm race between India and China as both have "competitive nuclear restraint" (Bajpai et al., 2020), both consider itself as a responsible nuclear power. During the border conflicts, both countries reiterate position of 'peace and tranquillity on the borders' while continuing the conflict. This normalises the border conflict and minor border standoffs.

Major objective of Chinese foreign policy is to create a discursive power. DODH (2021) argues that Chinese BRI, AIIB, New Development Bank, attempts to build Chinese discourse in global governance. According to Panda & Baruah (2019), China is ready to cooperate with India only in the condition when India acts in discursive framework of China. China names Quad as western led alliance aimed to destabilize Asia.

CONCLUSION

India China relations cannot be explained by realism through its lens of power politics. Instead, self-identity, identification of others, construction of anarchy, norms, value preferences, their strategic culture and discursive power shapes their relationship. Negative identity of each other is shaping their relationship. India on one hand embraces its civilisational values of mutual tolerance and respect whereas China is driven by value to create hierarchical order. China takes inspiration from its Confucian tradition blended with realism where India derives its values from Nehruvian idealism. There is a need for identity reconstruction to improve relationship between India and China. Relationship between India and China can be improved by shifting attitude towards each other, to move away from confrontation (Bajpai et al., 2020). Unless there is shift in mutual perception, relationship will not have upward trend. There is a need to deescalate the border conflict by de-securitisation of borders.

Political leaders have to take decisions which will build mutual trust which reframes the discourse. Informal summits like Wuhan (2018) should be encouraged. Role of civil society is essential to create trust building narratives. People to people contact should be facilitated. Both countries should look as

anarchy constructively. Border disputes should not halt to dialogue mechanism, as regular dialogues often bring stability. Both countries need to focus on sectors where they can absolutely gain, such as climate change, partnership in multilateral platforms, economic partnership to increase non-zero-sum game engagement. Incremental confidence building measures will improve relationship in long term.

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