Book Review:

Jagannath Panda,
India-China Relations:
Politics of Resource, Identity and Authority
in a Multipolar World Order,

Key words: Sino-Indian Relationship

Dr. Jagannath Panda gives a clear and structural description of the contemporary Sino-Indian relationship. He begins by discussing issues on the bilateral level, including the lingering border dispute (chapter 3), the perennial Tibet problem (chapter 4) and the emerging difference on the use of water resource (chapter 5). In Parts II and III, he demonstrates how India and China interacted with each other in or with reference to those regional government organizations of Asia: in the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar construct (chapter 7), regarding South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (chapter 8), in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (chapter 9), in Indian Ocean Rim Association (chapter 10), and regarding ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations (chapter 11). Tension remains on this level, as the two countries seek to be the commanding force in their respective spheres of influence (for China, it was mainly East Asia and South East Asia, while for India, South Asia and the Indian Ocean region). However, there are comparatively more opportunities for them to pursue regional interests in a give-and-take manner. The room for accommodation and reciprocation is even more notable in the domain of global governance. The identity of “developing country”, for example, enables Beijing and Delhi to collaborate in climate politics (chapter 14) and in reforming the existing global financial institutions (chapter 16). Overall, Dr. Panda makes a very good case
that the India-China relationship is not “ordained more by competition and conflict” (p.4) but one “in constant transition” (p.3) and characterized by “competition, coexistence and convergence of mutual interests” (p.5).

This book has many virtues. The leading three appear to be sobriety, nuance, and impartiality when it treats the various thorny issues in the Sino-Indian relationship. The author’s analysis, throughout the book, does not carry the sort of victimhood sentiment towards China that could be traced to the trauma left by the 1962 War to the Indian society. (Indeed, the Chinese society has its own version, which is towards Japan and the West, and known as “A Hundred Years’ Humiliation”.) The author, as a strategist, does not appear to allow those emotional attachments to affect his thinking over the future trajectory of Sino-Indian relations. Second, from a Chinese perspective, the author’s nuanced understanding of China is impressive. For example, he correctly distinguishes between the perceptions of the five groups of people in Mainland China — the media, the intellectual and scholarly community, the economic community, the ordinary citizens, and finally, the top leadership — towards India. Third, the author does not turn the book into a platform to endorse mechanically any contending position in the India-China boundary dispute, despite leading an important research centre at one of the best think tank in India. For instance, he faithfully presented the two countries’ differences on this lingering issue in the form of “the Indian contestation” or “the Chinese contestation” (p.35). Because of these precious qualities, this meticulous study on the India-China relationship shall be treated as a very good reference, as the author intends, not only by policy-makers but also by academia.

But impartiality does not mean that the book has no preferences or peculiar departures. Dr. Panda, by and large, sets out to answer the concerns of India, rather than China, with reference to the India-China relationship. There is yet another departure, methodology-wise: “a rational power political perspective” (p.3).

This perspective is defined in such a way that any contemporary state pursues three fundamental “realities” in its external affairs: “resources, identity, and authority”(p.4). In the case of India-China relations, both countries are searching for overseas energy resources for domestic development and for authority in the world in order to be treated with awe by other countries. As to identity, the author refers it to the banner of “developing country” and the way Delhi and Beijing uphold it: in many cases, it is treated not so much as a deep conviction but as a “tactic” or a “label” to achieve their national interests vis-a-vis the Western developed countries (p.9, p.11, p.199, p.213).

From this perspective, the author develops his one key assertion that “pragmatism prevails over any pretence of cooperation and conflict” in India-China relations (p.4). That is to say that Delhi and Beijing would not make one step closer to each other unless there was a concrete reward in sight. Likewise, in case of a conflict, they would not let sabre-rattling to be easily turned into a cut-throat fight, if the benefits of this escalation could not outweigh the associated costs. An exam-
ple of the opposite of this approach is Beijing’s Leaning-to-One-Side Policy at the beginning of the Cold War. This policy, resulting in China being built completely into the Socialist Camp, was guided more by ideology than by national interests.

A worthwhile question for future discussion is: would China stop behaving pragmatically when facing India? The question is valid primarily because there are in fact conditions for the state to be “a rational power” when dealing with others. When beleaguered by internal difficulties such as legitimacy crisis, famine, economic collapse, and rebellion, the state often acts in a radical way that would not be perceived as diplomatically wise. Beijing’s decision to launch an organized military attack on India in 1962 is one example. The Philippines’ recent suspension of its long-lasting dispute with China, which happened after American human-rights criticisms created notable pressure on Manila’s domestic legitimacy, is another instance. If, for example, India wades carelessly into the troubled water of East Asia where Taiwan was considered by Beijing to be one of the country’s core interests, the room for both countries to manoeuvre diplomatically will be considerably reduced.

Overall, this is an outstanding book that gives an insightful discussion of the contemporary India-China Relations.