Unselfish giants? The impact of China and India as security contributors in Asia

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ABSTRACT

With fast-growing economies, defence capabilities and international interests, China and India are becoming increasingly active as contributors of public goods in international security, such as anti-piracy operations, disaster relief, capacity building, humanitarian missions, stabilisation and peacekeeping. This paper will examine the factors behind China’s and India’s roles in contributing to security public goods in the Indo-Pacific region. It will also consider: the extent to which modernisation of these powers’ military capabilities is suited for these roles; the conditions under which China and India might expand such activities; and whether there will be distinctly Chinese and Indian styles of approaching these roles which might have implications for governance and international cooperation. The paper will conclude by considering what might be the consequences of enhanced Chinese and Indian security provision, including the potential impacts on the management of transnational security problems, the extension of Chinese or Indian geopolitical influence, and how other powers might respond, particularly in situations where China or India act unilaterally.

DISCUSSION NOTES

With the growing profile of such activities as Chinese anti-piracy patrolling and India’s billion-dollar aid program in Afghanistan, it is timely to focus on the impact of these powers as what might be termed ‘security providers’ – a largely new phenomenon. This paper will examine the growing roles of China and India as contributors of ‘international security public goods’, involving the use of their changing military capabilities, and focused primarily on the Indo-Pacific region.

With fast-growing economies, defence capabilities and global interests, China and India are likely to be increasingly active as contributors of public goods in international security, such as peacekeeping, stabilisation, humanitarian and disaster relief, and maritime security. This will be a mixed blessing.
I use the term ‘security contributors’ as shorthand for the use of military capabilities to provide public goods. These capabilities will often involve power projection of one kind or another.

What are public goods in global security? Hard to define, but generally: Goods whose impacts are indivisibly spread, globally or at least regionally. For instance:

- Protection of the maritime commons – eg. safe sea-lanes (as well as cyber and space security – although this preliminary analysis does not extend to those two areas, which go beyond conventional military capabilities)
- Peace, kept or monitored
- The enforcement of UNSC resolutions
- Counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction
- Stability, security and capacity-building in fragile states
- Disaster relief and humanitarian assistance.

There are different kinds of public goods, and they involve three different kinds of what might be termed ‘production technology’

- Additive – the more the merrier; the main thing here is to have a quantitative accumulation of contributions. Eg. Disaster relief: the more the better
- Best shot – the key quality here is the quality of contributions; where any one certain national contribution of sufficient quality might prove critical. Eg. Multinational missile defence
- Weakest link – the simple absence of a contribution, a gap in the web of international protection, could be disastrous. Eg. Gaps in patrolling.

There are no existing mechanisms internationally – government or market-based – to ensure that these goods will be provided efficiently, effectively, fairly, or at all.

Yet some governments provide them, at least some of the time, if they have capabilities and motives.

What then will be the impacts, in this area, of the rising power of China and India? Are they acquiring capabilities and motives? Are they increasingly willing to share the risks involved in providing public goods? Do existing providers of security public goods – especially the United States and its allies – really want them to?

**Some questions worth exploring**

What factors might expand, or impede, China’s and India’s roles in contributing to public goods in global security?

To what degree will modernisation/expansion of Chinese and Indian military forces include capabilities suited for the provision of global security public goods?
To what extent, and under what conditions and circumstances, might China and India be willing to deploy these forces to such ends?

Are there likely to be distinctly Chinese and Indian styles of approaching these roles? Will these styles be conducive to stability, or not? How effective? How counter-productive? Superior, inferior to Western approaches?

What are the strategic consequences of enhanced Chinese and Indian global security roles, for instance in the impact on the management of transnational security problems, or in augmenting (or complicating) Chinese and Indian geopolitical influence?

How will other powers be affected, and how might they respond? In particular, how will China and India respond to each other’s provision of public goods?

Will there be a competitive ‘demonstration effect’, with other former free-riders such as Japan and South Korea also doing more to provide public goods – both to gain kudos and avoid losing relative strategic influence?

How can greater security contributions, and the development of forces suited to them, proceed in a non-threatening manner?

What should more established security-providing countries, such as Australia, do? How do we engage rising powers in this area? What are the policy implications, including the risks and benefits?

The past, present, and potential future – what is changing?

Until a few years ago, the provision of global public goods in international security was associated more with Western than with Asian powers. The United States has long been the indispensable power for using its navy to keep the seas safe for commerce. Western countries more broadly have tended to play significant roles in UN-mandated security activities. They also have typically given substantially to human security missions involving the use of militaries, such as humanitarian assistance or disaster relief.

Apart from India’s long record of contributing many UN peacekeepers, the two Asian giants have mostly played only small parts in the provision of public goods for global security. This was in line with a long-professed ideology of ‘non-interference’ in other nations’ sovereign affairs, as well as a mistrust of any security activities led or dominated by Western powers. Low levels of activity were also consistent with the relative smallness and closed nature of their economies; their generally low engagement with the world (solidarity with Non-Alignment or revolutionary movements notwithstanding); and the then modest capabilities and reach of their armed forces. Another factor was the traditional differences among states over whether there indeed was such a thing as an international public good, and if so what they were — whether, for example, ‘keeping sea-lanes secure for commerce’ was
more about underwriting the consolidation of US/Western power and wealth than about providing a service to all.

The picture is changing. With rapid economic growth and rising global engagement, China and India are now experiencing commensurate modernisation of military capabilities and expansion of international interests — including, in some important areas, in convergence with the interests of the West. All of this has begun to show signs of translating into increased Chinese and Indian activity as security contributors. At the same time, the capacity and will for traditional Western powers to contribute in this field is showing signs of declining – particularly in the case of Europe in the wake of the financial crisis.

Both rising powers’ defence budgets will likely keep growing by at least eight percent a year. Both are acquiring or are aspiring to acquire power projection capabilities, notably blue-water naval platforms such as destroyers, aircraft carriers, sizeable transport ships (India’s 2007 purchase of the 17,000 tonne landing platform dock USS Trenton). China is building large amphibious lift ships, with multiple potential roles, and has completed a flagship of soft power projection: a large hospital ship, the Type 920, its answer to the USS Mercy.

The possibility of contributing to international missions plays only a secondary part in India’s naval thinking and a relatively minor – although plainly growing - one in China’s. In both cases, the development of forces suited for international co-operation is a byproduct of more urgent national security goals, such as coercing Taiwan, increasing China’s capacity to deploy force along sea lanes of communication dominated by the US, or consolidating India’s ability to defeat Pakistan, deter China and dominate the Indian Ocean.

But given the sheer scale of both powers’ anticipated capabilities — potentially the world’s second and third most powerful conventional militaries in the decades ahead — even this byproduct will be substantial.

China and India are accumulating interests far from their territory, including the need to protect energy extraction sites and transit routes, the security of sea lanes carrying their energy imports and other trade, the safety of their increased numbers of nationals living and traveling abroad (as well as of the diasporas the powers are re-embracing) and more generally the functioning of the regional and global economic, diplomatic and strategic order on which their growth depends.

On the question of the safety of nationals: so far only India has directly used military capabilities to help its nationals abroad in a foreign crisis – Operation Sukoon in 2006, Lebanon. We can expect more of the same, but with limits. For instance, how could India conceivably help more than a tiny fraction of the millions of its nationals in the Gulf in a future conflict there? An intriguing question becomes: how and when might China do something similar? Where – the South Pacific, Southeast Asia? Would China help its nationals only, or the wider ‘new Chinese’ diaspora in these regions?

Certainly a watershed moment was the decisions by China and India to deploy naval forces against the pirates of Somalia in late 2008, deployments which look set to
continue indefinitely and which also provide hard power benefits to the two powers. This is worth examining as a case study, including in terms of the motivations, the rationales, the capabilities, and the implications – including impact in terms of strategic influence and perceptions (eg. Wary Indian reaction to Chinese deployment). The anti-piracy experience is also a fascinating test case for the potential and the limits of coordination with other security providers, such as NATO, Russia, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Australia.

Both China and India wish to be seen to be responsible international citizens and security contributors, to varying extents and for a mix of reasons, including calculations of self-interest and relative power.

In China’s case, these include: a wish to prove that its credentials as a ‘responsible great power’ extend beyond diplomatic activity; an imperative to offset perceptions that its rise is somehow a threat to other states or that its presence/role in Africa is somehow predatory; and a wish to offset perceptions that it helps dangerous regimes such as Sudan’s; and a recognition that gaps in Western forces willingness to send troops (especially to Africa) provide opportunities for China. These were probably factors in China’s decision in 2007 to send peacekeeping forces to Darfur, with which China overtook France as the P5 country with the largest number of deployed UN peacekeepers.

In India’s case, there are imperatives to prove itself a serious security partner to the US, to assert credentials for a greater role in the world including as a permanent member of the UNSC, and underline dominance – albeit of a supposedly benign sort - in its neighbourhood. Such reasoning influenced, for instance, India’s prompt action in extending its 2004-05 tsunami relief operations to assist other states. Both powers appear to recognise that contributing to public goods in security can bolster their image and influence, both in a soft power sense and in providing their forces with experience and exposure to partners in the field. Chinese language writings about the reasons for an expanded role in peacekeeping emphasise this point, especially in learning about how Western militaries are organized – what are the secrets of their success?

Another factor in the advance of China and India as security contributors is the shortfall being left by others, including an over-stretched or at times reluctant West. In some areas, such as maritime security and disaster relief, this has led to an open invitation from the US for increased co-operation by partners in flexible coalitions with minimal conditions of entry: notably, the ‘Thousand-Ship Navy (TSN)’ concept, now evolved into the Global Maritime Partnership Initiative in official statements. The US and others (such as Australia, Japan, Singapore, France, Britain, China, South Africa, Brazil and some Gulf states) are already stepping up their naval exercises with India.

And there have been indications that some in the US would consider working with China in the context of the new (post 2007) cooperative US maritime strategy. Certainly US rhetoric is now clear on this point. How, and in what areas, remain open questions: although US-China Coastguard relations are well-developed, comfort levels in their navy-navy ties remain poor. Although the US openly welcomed China’s anti-piracy contributions in the Gulf of Aden – and has worked with China to
coordinate and deconflict those patrols with NATO efforts – the essentially political decisions by China to suspend much of the bilateral mil-mil relationship over such issues as Taiwan makes it extremely difficult to maximize cooperation in the provision of public goods more widely. It is difficult to see how this problem can be resolved in the short term, including due to clear China-US difference over interpretation of the law of the sea, and whether the US has a right to continue surveillance activities off the Chinese coast (another reason China cites for curtailing maritime cooperation). The fundamental tension here is that China sees trust/friendship as a precursor to cooperative activities, whereas the US sees cooperative activities as a precursor to trust/friendship.

India and China also are initiating an increasing range of maritime engagement and exercises with other countries, including each other.

In other areas, notably the deployment of ground combat forces, the going is slower and less certain — even though China and India remain comparatively stronger in their ground forces than in their maritime. For example, geopolitical circumstances and strategic mistrust mean that NATO’s problems in Afghanistan have not led to open requests for military assistance from India and China, even though these are two major regional powers with large stakes in the stability of that country and the defeat of violent Islamist radicalism. India, and most especially China, have serious reservations about deploying combat forces abroad, especially without an overwhelming national interest at stake and/or a UN flag. (India, for its part, has long been comfortable sending combat forces in UN peacekeeping missions.)

Yet India came very close in 2003 to deploying a division of troops to Iraq. In Afghanistan, Indian maintains a substantial paramilitary presence to project its large ($1 billion + ) aid projects. And incidents such as attacks on the Indian embassy in Kabul led to very mixed reactions in Delhi; some voices called for withdrawal, but others called for a genuine Indian military presence in that country. Still, this is unlikely to eventuate. On the other hand, India is set to continue its large capacity-building role in strengthening Afghanistan’s security forces to fend for themselves.

China’s closer relationship with Central Asia under the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has a security angle, under the mantle of ‘counter-terrorism’, which could provide a rationale for missions by Chinese forces in that region – but again, despite China’s large mining investments in Afghanistan, a Chinese troop presence is very unlikely. Indeed, if Western forces pulled out, China might well opt for a modus Vivendi with the Taliban instead.

Yet despite the mixed record so far, India’s and China’s growing capabilities and interests, along with the stasis or even relative decline in the ability or willingness of Western powers to deploy force abroad for perceived public goods, makes it highly likely that the Indian and Chinese roles in this regard will grow markedly in the next decade. This movement will be uneven. And their national roles are likely to differ.

India is becoming entrenched as a trusted partner of the US and other Western powers, and has a tradition of deploying soldiers for UN peacekeeping on which to build. Indeed, the US has an expectation of greater activism by India as a friendly
security contributor: it is one of the reasons for the blatant US policy of helping India become a major power.

China is starting without these advantages, but has the political ability to change direction quickly and decisively — for instance, training and deploying large numbers of combat forces for UN peacekeeping — if it were to see sufficient interests at stake.

In all of this, I see a long-term inevitability to China’s and India’s greater active role. But I also see a short-term fragility: setbacks, failures and casualties could strongly discourage short-term progress. China, for instance, has lost only a handful of peacekeepers. Chinese language writings are very sensitive about casualties. How might China respond if it lost, say, a dozen peacekeepers in a single action in Africa? Or if its forces ended up killing civilians, and this made global headlines?

In any case, sovereignty and non-interference concerns still weigh heavily on China’s decisions whether or not to lend a hand. The failure of China, and indeed of India, to push the Burmese regime into the prompt allowance of international forces to bring aid into the country after the cyclone in 2008 suggests that these powers remain a long way from a Western outlook on the provision of public goods and the responsibility to protect. The lessons of the 2004 tsunami were not so strong after all.

**Indicators**

*Is the expansion of Chinese and Indian contributions to global security public goods really happening?*

Some key indicators to watch for:

- Changes in rhetoric – the use of public goods as an explanation for the development and deployment of military capabilities. This is happening – for instance, the PLA’s new ‘historic mission’; India 2007 maritime doctrine ‘Freedom to use the seas’.
- The number of Chinese and Indian troops deployed in UN peacekeeping missions, their nature (medical, engineering, combat or otherwise) and training (will Chinese forces be given increased training in English language and international law?) The fact that the PLA is increasingly recruiting its officers straight out of civilian universities – where many of them are learning English – suggests that China will could make a leap in its capacity for international security cooperation as these junior officers attain positions of responsibility and seniority.
- Development of Chinese and Indian military capabilities suitable for provision of international public goods (such as transport and hospital ships, replenishment ships, heavy-lift transport aircraft, helicopters, peacekeepers, engineers, medics, police and paramilitaries trained for international deployments. These capabilities remain modest for both powers. Strategic lift is still small. Either of these enormous countries would be hard pressed to send and sustain more than a battalion at a time in a distant theatre, though they do have aspirations to increase this. Nonetheless, both powers do have some comparative advantages over other providers, for instance large forces of
paramilitaries and police already accustomed to large-scale law and order challenges. These include women-only police units, useful for building trust in conflict-damaged communities.

- Public opinion in China and India on the value of such deployments, in terms of national interests. Any signs of changing attitudes to casualties.
- Abilities and willingness of governments to develop convincing narratives to persuade publics of importance of deployments. This has happened, notably in China’s explanation of its Gulf of Aden anti-piracy mission: justification in terms of UN authorization, consistency with non-intervention ideology, relevance to Chinese economic interests and protection of Chinese nationals abroad, positive official media coverage.
- Involvement of China and India in informal maritime co-operation, such as Gulf of Aden Shared Awareness and Deconfliction arrangement (SHADE), former Thousand-Ship Navy/Global Maritime Partnership Initiative, Proliferation Security Initiative.
- Participation in security exercises with other countries, taking into account: scale, quality and seriousness of exercises, and the nature of scenarios exercised. So far most Chinese exercises with others have been very low key; search and rescue. Some Indian exercises with others have been more ambitious, including warfare serials.
- Indications of Chinese and/or Indian acceptance of stabilisation operations/humanitarian interventions, with or without UN mandate; and of willingness to participate.
- Changing attitudes to sovereignty sensitivities and the legitimacy of interventions. These views tend to be slow to change.
- Willingness of other powers, especially the US, to involve China and India in provision of global security public goods. The US still tends to talk in two languages on this; encouraging China to engage, yet emphasizing its wish to preserve unmatched capabilities.

Potential Impacts

The potential impact of growing Chinese and Indian contributions to global security public goods will be moderate over the next few years, but large in the medium to long term – even if neither power ever contributes public goods in proportion to its size, it will still be a great change from what we are all accustomed to. It will be felt in two broad ways.

First, in assisting with managing transnational security problems. China’s and India’s stepping up to the plate could provide much-needed weight to some efforts at stabilisation, peacekeeping, disaster relief or maritime security, operations which are often dominated by over-stretched Western forces or, where the West hold back, reliant on poor quality local or chronically third world forces (e.g. Bangladesh). Large force contributions from China and India could make some operations more effective, improving security and welfare for affected populations, states and economic interests. There could also be an indirect benefit, of Chinese and/or Indian forces freeing up Western forces for other missions.
One question here is about specialization; should we expect that Chinese and Indian forces will play certain roles and Western forces other roles, each playing to our relative strengths? Or might they rather deploy forces primarily on the basis of their interests and sensitivities, not necessarily in the areas where they can add value?

Second, the growth in Chinese and Indian force contributions will have strategic effects in affecting the relativities of power and influence among states. Larger Chinese and Indian security roles, including in regions further from their borders, will reflect their rising relative power in the hierarchy of states, but will also potentially add to it. There would likely be greater international recognition of their influence and their place as global security stakeholders and responsible major powers; something of a soft power effect.

Chinese language writings are frank about this: the ‘responsibility of a great power’. These writings also explicitly define Chinese peacekeeping in Africa as another way to win favour with African governments, thus further squeezing Taiwan’s political space.

There could also be a hard power effect, in that deployments abroad for actual or ostensible humanitarian or ‘common good’ reasons might also lead to, or provide cover for, expanded power and strategic influence, including in positioning assets for the long term, strengthening relations with security partners, gathering intelligence, improving logistics, communications and other capabilities through field experience, testing forces in conditions close to those of real war, and encouraging smaller countries to depend partly on Chinese and/or Indian capabilities for some security needs, where in the past they had relied largely on the US.

Objectively speaking, such developments of course would make sense in terms of Chinese and Indian strategic interests; and for western powers they would be neither wholly good nor bad.

But new roles for the rising powers in deploying force abroad might also have some decidedly negative effects on global security and welfare, such as adding to the instability and potential friction points accompanying a shift in the global balance of power. There could well be suspicion or resistance from other powers, if, for instance, India or China were to insert substantial forces into locations which other powers might see as their existing spheres of influence – for instance the Indians in the Indian Ocean, or the Europeans, especially the French, in Africa.

In particular, there would be a major diplomatic challenge for China or India to convince more established powers that their setting up permanent military bases abroad is in the common interest. Some debate on this has now begun in China, particularly in relation to Africa and the Gulf. Strengthening of India’s small base in Tajikistan would presumably trouble China.

A key point in all of this discussion is whether China and India elect to pursue expanded unilateral, as opposed to multilateral, contributions to security public goods.

On balance, the strategic effects of major unilateral Chinese and Indian roles in sea lane protection would be destabilising – the challenge will be to develop their
activities in concert with other powers, especially the US and each other. Here lies a critical policy challenges, including for countries like Australia.

Preliminary policy conclusions

On balance, the growing role of China and India as providers of global security public goods is a set of developments for us to broadly embrace, seek to manage and shape, and in some cases encourage. It will be easier for us to shape the nature of their engagement if we act sooner rather than later.

How can Australia have influence? We can seek to encourage the US to engage China. And Australia can be a place of engagement: a trusted and reliable host of multilateral exercises, like Kakadu, the biennial naval exercise due to be held again soon. Potentially we could offer a venue for a multilateral exercise involving all major powers in Asia.

Should Australia look to offer training for Chinese peacekeepers? English language training? Use the new Civil-Military Centre as a coordination point for this?

There will be a default position in some Western governments to assume that India is a more desirable security partner than China. This will not always be the case, and we should be willing to be open-minded about this – treat each instance of cooperation on its merits.

We will, however, need to come to terms with the fundamental question: should interests or values prevail in determining who to cooperate with? To what extent can powers with supposedly differing values – including perhaps in terms of military transparency – cooperate in providing public goods?

If established powers are uncomfortable with rising powers providing a greater degree of security public goods, then it is incumbent on the established powers to take a lead in engagement, and moreover to be willing to sustain and even expand their own contributions, as well as encouraging them from other powers which in the past have tended to free ride, such as Japan and South Korea (which both now have ships involved in anti-piracy efforts).