

AAS Webinar Series

Session 10: July 15, 2020

Chair: Dr. Reena Marwah; Host: Prof. Swaran Singh

Speaker: Prof. T V Paul

Sino-Indian Rivalry: Explaining Anomalies

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The tenth webinar session was held on the 15th of July from 5:30 P.M. to 7:30 P.M. on ‘Sino-Indian Rivalry: Explaining Anomalies’. The lecture was delivered by Prof. T V Paul, McGill Chair Professor at McGill University, Canada. The webinar commenced with Prof. Swaran Singh’s welcome address, followed by the speaker’s introduction by Dr. Reena Marwah.

Elaborating on the theme of the session, Prof. Paul mentioned how it emerged from two of his books: *‘The India-China Rivalry in the Globalization Era’* and *‘Restraining Great Powers: Soft Balancing from Empires to the Global Era’*, with emphasis on the Balance of Power theory. The Balance of Power theory has been a long-lasting theory in the realm of international politics, stretching its course over centuries; from Kautilya and Tsun Zhu, to modern European nation-states, to contemporary realist camp of International Relations. Additionally, while some are of the view that balance of power is a natural phenomenon, others believe it requires human intervention.

Prof. Paul points towards the two types of balancing - **hard balancing** and **soft balancing**. Hard balancing relies on military build up and formal alignment, whereas soft balancing relies on strategic partnerships and institutional mechanisms, while maintaining a non-military character. The former has been more privileged by IR scholars and policy makers since it is quantifiable and hence more noticeable. Soft balancing was more visible during the Cold War period. However, that too was not absolute balancing given the economic and infrastructural capacities of the U.S., and distancing from proxy wars and conflict by Soviet allies. However, the former was also caught up in the Cuban Missile Crisis and was wavering due to its alliance with Pakistan.

Talking about India’s Non-Alignment during the Cold War under Jawahar Lal Nehru, Prof. Paul emphasised the need for balancing at that point in time because of the powers and

capabilities of China, as well as the existential rivalry with Pakistan. However, the Indian military build up happened under Lal Bahadur Shastri and later under Indira Gandhi. In spite of Chinese nuclear testing and its perceived threats in Indian popular debate, India decided not to test nuclear weapons- challenging the balance of power theory. It is worth noting that India did increase its military expenditure and procured weapons from the Soviet Union, England and the U.S. An asymmetry arises when one recognises that the Indian forces are divided on two fronts, facing both China and Pakistan.

Things turned around when Indira Gandhi vehemently engaged in hard balancing against the U.S.-China-Pakistan alignment: an existential threat to India. Hard balancing progressed further with India conducting nuclear testing in 1998 under Atal Bihari Vajpayee. China was proclaimed as India's number one potential threat by Defence Minister George Fernandes. However, the wide understanding was that the nuclear weapons were not meant for China but for other peaceful purposes and to boost India's status. The China threat was viewed by the Bush administration rather seriously and India, a swing state at the time, was seen as a potential ally in balancing China.

The threat is more palpable under PM Narendra Modi with India building border infrastructure and increasing its artillery. This is supplemented by soft balancing on the part of India via its association with the Quad and alignment with ASEAN, Japan and Australia. This is seen as a hedging policy as concrete moves are difficult to come by given China's omnipresence in the international economy. The resistance is coming forth through institutional denial as in the case of the BRI and the RCEP. International resistance to China cannot be seen as a balance of power in the absolute sense but does have traces of containment within itself.

While elaborating on Chinese balancing behaviour, Prof. Paul called it a combination of hard and soft balancing along with hedging. It combines a distant hard balancing, with the help of Pakistan and military buildup, with its economic penetration in south-east Asia to counter the U.S. globally and India regionally. In light of a status competition, Chinese rarely mentions India as a threat, in spite of the latter's potential to be a strong peer competitor. This psychological warfare tries to sideline India as a second or third tier competitor by dividing the conflict with Pakistan. Hence, what we see is a mixture of strategies: institutional engagement plus other forms of competition. The inconsistent intervention at the contested border can be a response to India's infrastructure development projects and the perpetual tensions over Tibet. He terms this combination **under balancing** and explains that while existing literature

attributes it to domestic policies, nuclear deterrence, economic incentives for co-operation etc, these do not address the root issue as many factors, particularly nuclear weapons, are new to the problem of under balancing. He believes that under balancing has something to do with the way balance and rivalry hold and that it indicates an absence or perception of existential threat, wherein the opponent is viewed as threatening the physical existence as well as the core identity of the nation state which is built on ethnic, religious and ideological grounds. Alexander Wendt, a constructivist scholar, identifies various categories in his social theory of international relations including Hobbesian, Lockian and Kantian views. Hobbesian states view each other as enemies who do not recognise the Self as an autonomous being and therefore, will not willingly limit their self violence towards the Self. Thus, in the Hobbesian state, there is deep revisionism of the territorial kind. In the India-China rivalry, a more shallow revisionism can be seen- there are conditions of conflict, but the violence is self-limited by a mutual recognition of the right to exist. This is not true, however, for the India-Pakistan conflict. Prof. Paul believes that this is because Pakistan's identity is built around the notion of the Indian enemy and this is partly due to the violent nature of the Partition. Pakistan's hard balancing behaviour is visible in its alliances, arms acquisition and territorial attacks on Indian borders and in Kashmir.

Prof. Paul goes on to propose the following- 1) rivals should not fear existential threats and should not engage in intense hard balancing, instead they may resort to lower levels of soft balancing and other restraining mechanisms, 2) states in competition could develop trade and co-operative mechanisms to assuage conflict, and can develop a kind of interdependence, negating the need for intense hard balance. He further went on to say that what the world is witnessing with the India-China rivalry is an asymmetrical interdependence, citing the much higher overall India trade figures as proof. Thus, there is a tendency to not escalate issues beyond a point and he terms this a **managed rivalry**, with the potential for heightened conflict.

He identified India's reluctance to form or join a hard balance coalition given their desire for strategic autonomy, but lays out **abandonment and entrenchment** problems as having the potential to drive India into such an alliance, as witnessed in 1971. The problem is defined as follows- an alliance may be formed with a greater power which, in times of need, may intervene or rescue the other country because they have other interests. Alternatively, the other country may get trapped in the greater power's conflicts, despite having no interest in them. China's potential to become a superpower has strong implications for India's Non-Alignment desires.

The Q&A session locates economic dynamics, political relations, the role of international organizations spatially and historically, while also elucidating more abstract conceptualisations, such as the differential ideological motivations of involved parties. For instance, Prof Paul claimed that China's aggression is strategic and not ideological. Crucially, ideology is no longer driving China, state capitalism is. He finds this to be a favourable development, given the dangers of ideologically motivated authority- Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia or even chronologically regressive Mao's China are examples of this. He explained that an ideological basis could be identified when, for instance, an alliance is formed between India and other Quad members.

While answering questions pertaining to China's perception over its internal disputes in view of Tibet, he highlighted the importance of Tibet to the Chinese strategists for their integrity and how India's act of sheltering the Dalai Lama on humanitarian grounds endangered Chinese aspirations. He also commented on the lack of commitment to their word by the Chinese government while tackling the Hong-Kong issue. China's code of conduct has clearly been the centre of many discussions recently.

Bringing India into the picture, and focusing on the 'Managed Sino-Indian Rivalry', Prof. Paul explained the mutual trade and economic benefits shared due to co-operation and a common position on various issues. Moreover, post Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in 1988, there was a mutual agreement to set aside border issues and shift focus to the areas where the two nations could co-operate. This was followed by a phase of 'Peaceful Rise' on China's behalf. But recent developments under Xi Jinping suggest that China no longer intends to 'rise together' with India. This makes the future proposition of a managed rivalry unlikely. He suggests that any miscalculation and premature actions on China's part could escalate global tensions rapidly, and turn things ugly soon. Thus, even though managed rivalry was efficient in context of global economic interdependence, given the current scenario, with companies pulling out of China, and the U.S. pressuring India to enforce certain policies, the rivalry is likely to intensify.

The discussion further expanded upon political instability and uncertainty in the U.S. and its impact on Indo-Pacific security and peace amid the pandemic. Referring to Karl Polanyi's '*The Great Transformation*', he talks about the recent developments calling for de-globalisation. Previously the class divisions in the U.S. were based on an ideological divide, but today ethnicity, religion and economic status are the determinants of the divide. The stark divide between the rich and the poor, with an expanding middle class has given rise to the

disgruntled groups who are devoutly supporting Trump, who has emerged as the epitome of populism. Thus, the American transition phase has highlighted the shortcomings of the U.S., placing its origins in the Clinton period and their severe underestimation of China. China has disproportionately benefited from globalisation, and their ability to provide cheap goods, despite benefitting the consumer, has negatively impacted the job security and manufacturing sector globally. He believes China has done little to warrant its stance. Prof. Paul comments on the lack of global visionary leaders, and how Trump and Xi Jinping have failed the world. He envisions collective action by the nations, rather than monopolising on a global crisis.

While commenting on the economic competition between India and China in the African continent, he believes the rivalry would ultimately benefit Africa, given that the intentions are not out-rightly self-serving. He believes that Africa holds potential to regulate managed competition. But India lacks resources as compared to China, to put up a strong front despite the goodwill.

Prof. Paul resolved questions on Nehru's decision to pass the UNSC permanent membership to China despite the widely equal status of the two nations. In hindsight, he believed that it was the right thing to do on Nehru's part as this would've only added to the grievances, and moreover it was not guaranteed that India would have held the seat in the long run. He also shed light on various instances of short sightedness on India's part too, but justified Nehru's stance for the case. He also advocated for peaceful settlements, and advised against highly emotional stances on various issues.

In his concluding remarks, Prof. Paul addressed doubts pertaining to Russia's stance on the growing Indo-U.S. ties. He believes it is not entirely implausible for Russia to take a neutral stance if Chinese rivalry intensifies. Moreover, in times of crisis, the U.S. has acknowledged that it cannot supply arms efficiently, and thus either Russia, France or Israel will have to step in.

Wrapping up the session, Dr. Reena Marwah thanked the speaker for sharing his extensive knowledge and delivering an intellectual presentation with a pragmatic approach. She extended her gratitude towards the participants for engaging enthusiastically and patiently.