

Beyond Offensive Realism: India's Rise, U.S. Accommodation

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With India making steady strides to increase its relative and material capabilities, the twenty-first century has seen another aspiring great power in the Eastern Hemisphere. According to the theory of offensive realism, which posits a conflict between a rising power and an established hegemon, India would inevitably clash with the United States. Does Washington consider New Delhi's rise as an inevitable threat? Does India want to undermine the current rules-based order? In this essay, I argue that contrary to the tenets of offensive realism, a rising state that maximizes its power does not always lead to conflict between itself and an established hegemon because offensive realism neglects the vital role of the perception of states of one another. Such perception affects relative power distribution and a state's foreign policy and helps determine whether and to what extent states conflict and/or cooperate.

Power and Offensive Realism

Defining power is an arduous task in the field of international politics. For this essay, I utilize John Mearsheimer's definition of power as "material capabilities that a state possesses" (2001, 55). The "balance of power," according to him, is the "function of tangible assets" (Mearsheimer 2001, 55). Moreover, he divides the concept of power into "military power" and "latent power."

Military power rests “on the size and strength of a state’s army and its supporting air and naval forces” (Mearsheimer 2001, 56). Even though we live in the nuclear age, armies are still the driving force behind a state’s strategic success (ibid.). “Independent naval forces and strategic air forces” may be useful at “coercing other states into making territorial concessions,” but “great-power wars are won mainly on the ground” (ibid.). As a result, the most powerful states possess the most potent land forces. “Latent power,” (55) meanwhile, “refers to the socio-economic” (55) elements that help build military power. Accordingly, it is mainly based on a “state’s wealth and the overall size of its population” (60).

Also, “population size matters a lot because great powers require big armies, which can be raised only in countries with large populations. States with small populations cannot be great powers” (61). In addition to population size, Mearsheimer highlights that “wealth is important because a state cannot build a powerful military if it does not have the money” (ibid.) to train and modernize its army.

The theory of offensive realism explains why states engage in security competition. If you couple that with relative uncertainty that clouds the judgement of states vis-à-vis each other and the fact that all states possess certain levels of offensive capability, you are looking at a highly competitive and complex strategic environment.

As a systemic theory, offensive realism aims to explain state behavior based on the role of international anarchy and the global balance of power. States engage each other based primarily on the fluctuations of power in the system. Also, the theory assumes that all states are what the literature calls “black boxes” that are dissatisfied with, and seek to alter, the established international order. For states to survive, they will have to maximize power, which may inevitably lead to more conflict because they aim to revise the established order and challenge the influence of an established hegemon.

According to Mearsheimer (2001, 41), due to the “stopping power of water,” powerful states vie for regional, instead of global, hegemony. A clear example would be the United States (U.S.) in the Western

Hemisphere. The U.S. is unmatched in this area in terms of military and material capability; however, because of its dominant position, it will not tolerate any other state which will maximize its power and greatly influence the affairs on its side of the world (Mearsheimer 2001, 42). Accordingly, a great power like the U.S. can intervene to prevent the rise of great powers in other regions (*ibid.*) if, says Snyder (2002, 160) in a review of Mearsheimer (2001), “local powers cannot contain their would-be hegemon.” However, despite its efforts, the U.S. continues to face the changing global distribution of power.

U.S.-China Conflict and Offensive Realism

The past few decades have ushered a new structural shift in the international system—the steady rise of China in both military and economic domains. The population of the United States stands at around 329 million (United States Census Bureau 2020) while China’s is at 1.44 billion (Worldometer 2020). In terms of wealth, as of 2019, the U.S.’ gross domestic product (GDP) is estimated at US\$ 21433.20 billion (Trading Economics n.d.), while China’s stands at US\$ 14.6 trillion (Allison 2020). Both states possess a large population, a significantly large economy, and have two of the world’s most formidable militaries. However, while China has joined the U.S. among the world’s great powers, there is still a clear asymmetry between the two in terms of material capability, with the U.S. clearly being dominant. Even so, this does not take out any possible risks China can pose to the strategic interests of the U.S.

Based on the theory of offensive realism, as China continues to grow and increase its relative power, it will act assertively to become a regional hegemon and challenge the U.S.-led rules-based international order. Beijing is indeed treading towards this direction with its adventurism and coercion in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, with Australia, its border with India, and the greater Indian Ocean Region. In fact, it has also shown aggression towards Russia—a state many would assume to be its key partner—

vis-à-vis the Russian city of Vladivostok (Gill 2020). China's actions appear show that it intends to alter the global order and the distribution of goods, which as Jason W. Davidson (2006) explains includes "territory, markets, the expansion of ideology, and the creation or change of international law and institutions" (41). Indeed, China continues to assert itself and expand its territory at the expense of other states to undermine global democratic values (Chaudhury 2019), to reshape the global political economy based on the Beijing consensus (Kurlantzick 2013), and to influence international institutions based on its narrow self-interest (Brands 2020).

Should a Rising India Conflict with the United States?

The theory of offensive realism—and its explanation for state conflict—holds true for China and the U.S., which are now locked in a competition for dominance, with Beijing clawing to dominate Asia and the U.S. trying to constrain the latter from doing so. But if offensive realism explains U.S.-China conflict as one between a rising power and an established hegemon, how can we explain the lack of conflict and indeed, even cooperation between India and the United States? New Delhi is a rising great power, but why isn't it in conflict with Washington? Going back to premise of offensive realism, the U.S. would not even consider accommodating India's rise in the international system.

According to the Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index of 2019—which ranks powers based on eight factors: "economic resources, military capabilities, resilience, future resources, diplomatic influence, economic relationships, defence networks, and cultural influences"—India has cemented its place as an established major power (Lowy Institute 2019). Though these factors seem more intricate than those of Mearsheimer's, most of them can arguably be bracketed under the greater umbrella of his notions of military power and latent power. Additionally, India has the world's largest "ground force" (Philip 2020), the sixth largest economy (Babones 2021), and the second largest population (Hackett 2018).

During its independence in 1947, India espoused a policy of non-alignment, eschewing the two competing poles of the international system during the Cold War: the U.S. and the Soviet Union. However, as India's ambitions grew to become a more influential player, it began crafting a policy of multi-alignment which allowed it to engage with the other powerful states, maintaining robust relations with both the U.S. and Russia and other states in the system such as Israel, the Arab states, and Iran. External Affairs Minister Dr. Jaishankar emphasized that

The world today has moved on from what the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) founding leaders faced in Bandung in 1955. The scales of global geo-political balance have shifted, and continue to do so, propelled by forces of globalization and transformational technological progress. Long-held assumption and alignments rooted in the legacies of colonialism and the ideology of the Cold War are making way for new configurations and partnerships. (Roy 2019)

At the same time, however, India has projected its power outside its own borders. It is steadfast in expanding eastwards, northwards, and westwards, and incorporates a “360-degree vision of the opportunities available outside South Asia” (Scott 2009). In 2004, the Indian government provided a conceptual framework—“extended neighborhood”—which “stretches from the Suez Canal to the South China Sea and includes within it West Asia, the Gulf, Central Asia, South East Asia, East Asia, the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region” (Sinha 2004). This project of power comes through hard military power, or soft or economic power, alongside cultural and ideational projection. A series of frameworks and projects have been devised to implement this objective. The Look East Policy of the 1990s, which has now been reinvigorated as the Act East Policy, aims to enhance connectivity between India and East Asia and the Eastern Pacific in the economy, defense, and sociocultural ties. Similar initiatives have also been implemented, such as the Connect Central Asia Policy for Central Asia and the Look West Policy for West Asia.

U.S. Accommodation of India

Following the theory of offensive realism, U.S. perception of India should be negative. But even if New Delhi has grown as a regional power, Washington does not see it as a threat, and India does not show any signs of being a revisionist great power. In July 2020, Lisa Curtis, deputy assistant to former President Donald Trump and director of the U.S. National Security Council's South and Central Bureau, spoke of Washington's confidence in New Delhi. Bagchi (2020) writes that "the U.S. supports India's rise as a power and net security provider in the Indian Ocean 'and beyond.'" This close relationship has been evident in the U.S.-India Nuclear Deal; India's designation as Major Defence Partner (Raj 2016); U.S. provision of weapons, military equipment, and technology transfer. For its part, New Delhi openly supports, and integrates its great power designs with the U.S.-led rules-based order (Laskar 2020), which can be seen in its active participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and its interest in a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Beyond Offensive Realism: The Role of Perception

This illustrates that the U.S.-India relationship goes beyond the black box narratives of offensive realism and must be examined from a more sub-systemic perspective, with special emphasis on individual state perception, which helps explain China-US (and India) conflict on the one hand and US-India cooperation. Of course, it cannot be ignored that containing China is an important element in New Delhi-Washington ties; it is not the sole factor, however, since this close relationship is multifaceted and converges on the economy, defense and democratic values.

What US-India relations show is that offensive realism presents a static narrative, which sees all rising states as dissatisfied revisionists that aim to significantly alter the established international order and undermine

the influence of the regional hegemon. The theory only looks at state interaction from the prism of systemic power shifts, and discounts the fact that individual states possess different perceptions—of each other and the international order—which affect their foreign policies and determine the extent they cooperate and clash. Indeed, the close ties between the US and India challenges the dictates and assumptions of offensive realism because the former accommodates the latter’s ascension. Washington’s support for New Delhi shows a state maximizing its power does not automatically lead to revisionism, i.e. an intention to challenge the current world order.

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