

BOOK REVIEW in *Indian Journal of Economics and Business* (September 2011):
Martin Sieff. 2009. *Shifting Superpowers: The New and Emerging Relationship Between the United States, China, and India*. Washington, DC: Cato Institute.

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Two huge nations, the most populous in recorded history, are rapidly gaining military and economic power — challenging the long-held idea that America's global dominance is unassailable. India is a democracy, and China is not, yet author Martin Sieff asserts that the difference is temporary: China must succeed in becoming a free-market capitalist society soon or face the threat of one billion of its more disenfranchised citizens turning against it.

Unnerved by the prospect of this dual hegemonic challenge, the United States has been pressuring both countries about a number of issues, particularly human rights and nuclear proliferation while it seeks to engage India and contain China. It has see-sawed between approving, and disapproving, of various developments in both countries — first drawing close to the one, and then to the other, in efforts to influence their direction and thus secure U.S. interests. However, Sieff states that "promoting individual liberty, limited government, and peace [will be] best served if U.S. policymakers turn away from trying to influence the internal affairs of China and India." (4) Not only does he feel that such efforts have had mixed results at best, he maintains that the U.S. no longer has the ability to exert such influence in Asia.

Sieff reviews the historical panorama of America's relationships with both China and India to explain why this is so. India, an ancient and complex civilization, was colonized by Great Britain over a period of some two centuries but granted its independence at the end of World War II. The United States, meanwhile, pretty much ignored India, even though longtime direct training by the British military helped India develop one of the most effective military machines (including nuclear weapons capabilities) in all of Asia. For most of the 20th century, U.S. foreign policy was focused on preventing the spread of communism and securing America's defense against nuclear warfare — and India posed a threat in neither direction, especially as it became progressively democratic after initial incursions into economic socialism. Even when India formed an alliance with the former Soviet Union in the mid-1960s, the U.S. remained unconcerned — an indication of India's insignificance to the U.S. at that time.

As for China, its civilization has been remarkable for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it goes back without interruption for thousands of years. Its history over the last 150 years, however, has been a chaotic and bloody one — ever since regular trade relations with western countries were established in the 1800s. The United States first got directly involved in Chinese affairs when it backed the pro-American dictator Chiang Kai-Shek, a military leader and convert to Christianity, out of fear of Mao Zedong's People's Revolution.

But Mao eventually won, and Chiang fled to the Chinese island of Taiwan, which has remained under U.S. protection ever since even in the face of occasional saber-rattling from the mainland. But while China is determined to not let Taiwan declare its independence, it also is not willing to risk an all-out military conflict with the U.S. After it experienced the devastating military power of the U.S. during its brief incursion into the Korean War, it backed off and has avoided further such confrontations.

Under Mao's successor, the gifted planner and political-economic architect Deng Xiaoping, massive industrialization and Deng's enthusiastic application of American and British free-market policies took China to a whole new level of development. As a result, overseas investment flooded in, and the economy boomed. Up to this time, India had outstripped China economically, but now the tables were turned. Whereas India was still hamstrung by layers of inept bureaucracy and overly idealistic socialist values, China became an industrial juggernaut whose centralized, authoritarian state provided the structure and control to maintain security and stability.

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy sent aid to India shortly after the Cuban Missile Crisis — in response to Mao's attempt to not only capture Kashmir but invade the vast plains of India below. But this was pretty much a one-time show of support until President Richard Nixon took the visionary step of normalizing relations with China in 1972. Then, in the mid- to late 1990s, India came onto the United States' geopolitical radar screen. Once it became clear that India had made great strides economically, societally, and militarily, the U.S. began to engage more directly with its leadership. While America's relations with India as a rising democracy warmed and strengthened toward the end of the 20th century, relations with China cooled — especially after China brutally crushed the pro-democracy demonstrators at Tiananmen Square.

Historically, there has been some trade between China and India over the centuries, but not as much as one might expect from their status as neighbors. Instead, from time to time before the British colonial presence, there were military skirmishes between the two, especially along the Himalayan front. Things came to a head through the aforementioned confrontation in Kashmir in 1962, where a surprise attack by massive Chinese ground forces were ultimately countered by India's superior air power. Mao subsequently declared a ceasefire, yet through the invasion he acquired 33,000 square kilometers of previously Indian territory.

In the late 20th century, Indian leaders and economic planners were shaken by China's explosive industrial and economic development and the trauma of two back-to-back assassinations of Indian prime ministers: first Indira Gandhi, followed by her successor, her son Rajiv. Not surprisingly, therefore, in recent years, especially after mixed signals from various U.S. administrations in America's attempts to maintain constructive relationships with both India and Pakistan (longtime enemies) post-9/11, India's relationship with China has moved toward peaceful coexistence. In fact, the two countries often present a united front against American attempts to link trade and social issues, even while the U.S. continues to seek to position India as a democratic and strategic counterweight to perceived economic and military competition from China.

In the remaining decades of this century, issues that will need to be faced by the U.S. vis-a-vis China and India will be the determination of what happens to Taiwan, America's new status as a debtor nation to China, India's continued economic growth and influence worldwide, the "North Korea issue," and future Chinese-Indian relations. According to Sieff, U.S. hegemony in Asia has come to an end, and this is good. After three major wars (the Pacific theater during World War II, followed by the Korean and Vietnam Wars) at the cost of 200,000 American lives, it is clear to that U.S. interests were not well served by our previous efforts at steering political and nationalistic outcomes.

Now, in the second decade of the 21st century, the U.S. hopes to strengthen its financial ties with China and its strategic ties with India. Sieff maintains that historically, American policymakers have repeatedly engaged in serious miscalculations and errors of judgment with both China and India due to their ignorance of history and culture. Yet, while a major conflict with China is possible, it is not inevitable. U.S. policymakers should engage Beijing, but do so carefully and with clarity. Meanwhile, India's serious needs for energy resources, and the ongoing possibility of a nuclear engagement between it and Pakistan, must also be included in U.S. calculations of its relations with both countries. That is why Sieff warns that going forward, it is important that the U.S. avoid its previous extremes of either demonizing or romanticizing Asian powers — and to learn to deal with India and China as equals rather than as subordinates.