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Boquérat Gilles, Grare Frédéric, *India, China, Russia. Intricacies of an Asian Triangle.*

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## NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Jonathan Hall

- 1 Swaran Singh is currently one of India's most active researchers in the field of contemporary Chinese strategic studies. This work presents an overall view of the political and strategic issues affecting the relations between China and its South-East Asian neighbours. The first part, entitled *Issues*, identifies the main points of friction which have arisen between China and these neighbours, around the questions of Tibet, the Kashmir entanglement, and the struggle for influence in the Indian Ocean. The second part (*Equations*) reviews the bilateral links between China and each of the seven countries of South-East Asia. The third part (*Policies*) sets out a systematic analysis of China's South-East Asian policies, and highlights their major directions over the last fifty years.
- 2 The book sets out to show that relations between India and China are essentially a by-product of the latter's policies towards South-East Asia in general. At the same time, however, these policies turn out to be focused mainly on India, because of that country's preponderance within the regional sphere. From a historical point of view,

security concerns have played the leading role in China's approach. The often contested "liberation" of Tibet in 1950 rapidly poisoned relations with the countries on China's borders, primarily with India, against whom it finally mounted a "punitive" expedition on the Himalayan frontier in 1962. In the 1960s and 1970s, against the background of the diplomatic freeze with New Delhi, China embarked on a policy of active economic aid to the smaller South-East Asian nations, including a large number of arms shipments, to counteract India's influence in the region.

- 3 Subsequently, Singh's book shows that strategic preoccupations gave way to a more pragmatic approach, under the influence of the reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping. The normalisation of relations with India in the 1980s led Peking to adopt a neutral stance towards the Indo-Pakistani conflict in Kashmir, and to distance itself from the other countries of South-East Asia. However, the author emphasises that this shift in direction did not take place without certain contradictions, since the rapprochement with India in no way put an end to the shipments of arms to Pakistan. According to the author, this major contradiction, at least in the eyes of New Delhi, is what led directly to the Indian nuclear tests in May 1998. He stresses a very important point with regard to Sino-Pakistani relations, namely, that contrary to the expectations of the Chinese government, the transfer of sensitive technology to Pakistan did not make the latter completely dependent on Peking in the minds of the decision-makers in Islamabad. They simply became more defiant towards India, while retaining their independence with regard to China. This is borne out by the Pakistani nuclear tests in June 1998, which were conducted in response to the Indian tests and in defiance of China's calls for restraint.
- 4 The big risk in undertaking such a large and complex task as the study of the relations between China and South-East Asia, is that one can be enticed into "macro" analyses and deploy concepts like "South-East Asia", or even "China", as though they were monolithic entities. This book does not entirely avoid such pitfalls. Perhaps a more constructivist analytical method would have thrown greater light on why the perceptions of India by the Chinese decision-makers—and by others—are so conditioned by a South-East Asian conceptual framework. But this work has the merit of raising an essential question: *viz.* at the present moment, when India's strategic ambitions are expanding to include the whole of Asia, is the Peking government ready to redefine China's relations with India outside the constraints of a purely South-East Asian frame of reference? In other words, is China prepared to consider its Indian neighbour as no longer a merely regional power, but as a major cornerstone in Asia as a whole?
- 5 There are certain elements of a possible reply to this question in the slim volume edited by Gilles Boquérat and Frédéric Grare. This is a collection of articles by five French and Indian specialist contributors, based on the hypothesis of a triangular relationship between China, India and Russia. Their concern is to investigate informally the prospects for a *strategic* triangle proposed by the Russian premier, Yevgeny Primakov, in December 1998. Although such a triangle may appear premature, if it is understood as a fully formalised strategic partnership, the relations which have developed between the three powers lead these writers to speak of an *Asian* triangle, defined in their terms as "a loose entity which, despite its own inner dynamics and contradictions, is laden with direct consequences for the whole continent of Asia".

- 6 Gilles Boquérat's historical approach shows that even the tentative dream of trilateral Sino-Russian-Indian co-operation is an event in itself, for recent history contains hardly any precedents for such a three-sided diplomatic arrangement. However innovative it may be, contemporary tendencies towards this idea of an Asian triangle are nonetheless not without tensions. One of its main structural problems is China's disinclination to recognise India as playing a pivotal role in Asia. China's mixed feelings are clearly brought out in the chapter by Jean-Pierre Cabestan. He shows that, even while she extols a multipolar ideal, China is above all concerned with establishing itself as the *alter ego* of the United States in the Asian theatre, and this means ensuring that no other power, such as India or Japan, be allowed to cast a shadow over such ambitions. For his part, Frédéric Grare notes that the strategic partnerships between the three corners of the triangle have remained bilateral in nature. And whereas the Indo-Russian and the Sino-Russian links are relatively firm, Sino-Indian relations, notwithstanding their increased warmth, are still undoubtedly the weakest link.
- 7 There is another critical parameter, namely the dominant influence of the United States. Even though the idea of an Asian triangle has arisen out of a shared disquiet in the face of the American superpower, that country remains the privileged partner of each of the three others, and this fact undoubtedly places a limit on their prospects for co-operation. But, according to these authors, a trilateral rapprochement may still provide a tempting option, if it permits each participant to increase its power, while helping to preserve regional security. That is why Swaram Singh's opinion is that the idea of an Asian triangle offers a promising strategic paradigm for Asia, and one that is certainly more promising than the anti-missile defence plan promoted by the United States. Finally, in an exploratory chapter, Kanti Bajpai identifies a certain number of problem areas in which India, Russia and China could strengthen their co-operation. These include Islamic terrorism, the American anti-missile defence plan, and the energy reserves in Central Asia.
- 8 The clarity of this work by different authors throws into relief the motives behind the three countries' interest in entertaining the idea of a triangular relationship, while nonetheless stressing the numerous practical contradictions which it would entail. One of the immediate goals would be progress from the conceptual stage to the beginnings of a working partnership, however limited. The overall survey undertaken by this volume could perhaps have been more complete with the participation of a Russian expert. And, looking further ahead, it would be particularly interesting to have an American view of the prospect of a formal entente between the three major Asian powers.