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BOOK REVIEW

INDIA TURNS EAST: INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND US-CHINA RIVALRY

By

FRÉDÉRIC GRARE

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Faiza Rizwan*



In recent years, India's geopolitical environment has undergone significant transformation.

Amid an intensifying global trade war, New Delhi has often found itself navigating an increasingly complex relationship with both the United States and China. While Beijing has occasionally sought India's assistance in the US tariff war, New Delhi's insistence

on strategic autonomy and the pursuit of its regional interests reveal a careful balancing act rather than alignment. Amidst these evolving dynamics, India has sought to strengthen partnerships with Southeast Asian and Pacific powers such as Japan and Australia in consonance with its long-standing preference for autonomy and calibrated engagement. It is within this broader strategic context that Frédéric Grare's *India Turns East: International Engagement and US-China Rivalry* (2017) assumes particular relevance with its central argument that New Delhi's eastward orientation is fundamentally shaped by the "China factor" and the imperative of strategic balancing.

Grare offers an analytically rigorous and empirically grounded examination of India's evolving foreign policy in Asia with particular attention to shifting power dynamics between the US and China. The book traces the origins and evolution of India's 'Look East Policy' (LEP), which was officially launched in 1992 under Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao, and its subsequent

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transformation into the 'Act East Policy'. Grare situates India's eastward turn within a broader strategic recalibration rather than a narrow economic outreach through his examination of New Delhi's motivations, its engagement with regional institutions, and the constraints imposed by domestic capacity and external pressures.

The book's central thesis convincingly demonstrates that the LEP was not merely an economic initiative aimed at integrating India into Southeast Asian markets, but a strategic response to China's growing assertiveness. While the policy initially prioritised trade and economic integration, it gradually acquired a security dimension through enhanced engagement with ASEAN, defence cooperation with regional states, and tacit alignment with Washington's efforts to balance Beijing. Grare argues that India's approach has consistently reflected caution, seeking influence without provoking confrontation, and partnerships without formal alliances.

The book is structured into four broad sections. The first examines the strategic drivers of the LEP, focusing on New Delhi's perception of China as a challenge and its cautious engagement with the US as a

potential partner. The author identifies Beijing and Washington as the twin external drivers shaping India's eastward orientation, with the "China factor" occupying a central place. He traces how the memory of the 1962 Sino-Indian War, combined with Beijing's rapid economic and military rise, reactivated Indian strategic anxieties and redefined China as both a competitor and a constraint in its regional aspirations.

From a contemporary perspective, Grare's assessment appears particularly perceptive. What he characterises as a "gradual balancing strategy" has since evolved into a more layered and assertive posture, visible not only along the contested Himalayan borders but also in India's economic and technological responses to China, including restrictions on Chinese digital platforms following the 2020 Galwan clashes. Grare's portrayal of New Delhi as a regional balancer acting from a position of relative constraint rather than dominance remains analytically compelling.

The discussion of India-U.S. relations further reinforce this argument wherein the author highlights convergences between Washington and New Delhi on issues

such as the South China Sea and Myanmar, while emphasising India's reluctance to enter into formal alliances. Washington is thus portrayed not as a straightforward ally, but as a complex partner whose policies have at times pushed New Delhi toward caution rather than alignment.

In the second section, Grare focuses on India's engagement with Southeast Asia, particularly through defence diplomacy and regional institutions. While highlighting the limits imposed by its material and institutional constraints, the book documents India's growing outreach to ASEAN states such as Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, and positions these relationships as potential counterweights to Chinese influence in the region. Notwithstanding these gains, he exposes how the LEP faced hurdles in actualising "Look East" into "Act East" as demonstrated by persistent delays of connectivity projects India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway. In contrast, China's Belt and Road Initiative has achieved far deeper penetration across Southeast Asia. Herein, the book's analysis of India–Myanmar relations is particularly instructive as it highlights the dual imperatives of countering Chinese influence and managing insurgency in India's

Northeast. At the same time, it does not sufficiently address how ASEAN states perceive New Delhi either as a credible strategic balancer or merely a supplementary partner to Beijing and Washington.

The third section examines India's relations with key Pacific partners, particularly Australia and Japan. Here Grare identified a persistent ambivalence in Indo–Australia ties arguing that despite shared democratic values and concerns about China there remains a degree of strategic hesitation and underinvestment. While this assessment may have broadly depicted the status of these ties five years ago, there have been greater convergence since as demonstrated by their signing of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and deeper Quad cooperation. In contrast, the book presents New Delhi's partnership with Japan as one of the most substantive successes of the Look East Policy. It highlights cooperation in infrastructure, economic assistance, and civil nuclear energy even as it cautioned about India's bureaucratic inefficiencies and policy inconsistencies that have often frustrated Japanese stakeholders.

In the final section, Grare focuses on India's economic and institutional integration within Asia and offers a

comparative perspective vis-à-vis China, arguing that New Delhi seeks regional visibility without assuming leadership responsibilities, particularly within ASEAN-centred frameworks. Such a pattern has remained evident in India's policy outlook through decisions like its withdrawal from the RCEP negotiations in 2019, reflecting the tension between aspirations for leadership and domestic protectionist pressures. As such, despite New Delhi's participation in forums such as the East Asia Summit, ADMM-Plus, and BIMSTEC has expanded over the years, Grare's central observation that India continues to act with the caution of a peripheral rather than a central power does retain explanatory value.

Nevertheless, *India Turns East* is not merely a study of the Look East Policy, rather it is an exploration of

India's deeper strategic temperament. Although the book has been published some eight years ago, it remains relevant for its analysis of the structural and psychological factors that continue to shape New Delhi's foreign policy outlook towards this region and beyond as evidenced. India's contemporary activism in the Indo-Pacific continues to be tempered by a reluctance to embrace rigid alliances and assume overt leadership roles. Grare provides a nuanced framework for understanding India's position within an increasingly contested regional order by integrating strategic analysis with insight into India's institutional and ideological constraints. This makes the book an indispensable resource for scholars and practitioners seeking to interpret New Delhi's cautious yet consequential turn toward the East.



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