BOOK REVIEW


In their books, Manoj Joshi and Stephen Westcott both begin with the Galwan Incident in 2020, the confrontation between Chinese and Indian border troops where two dozen are killed by rocks, fists, and clubs in a scene reminiscent of prehistoric conflict. Joshi, a journalist by trade, tells a story filled with anecdotal conversations with key players in India and China, to include prime ministers, diplomats, and soldiers. On the other hand, Westcott’s book has a clearly delimited theoretical framework applied to the Sino-Indian border dispute and told in a fashion more familiar to an academic audience. While these two books have different styles and hypotheses, their different approaches reinforce one another well. Joshi’s story is more historical, filled with the details of high-altitude and remote combat, with information on road construction and basing, but this is largely told from the “first image.” In other words, Joshi largely tells a story about the personalities involved in the disputes rather than the domestic politics and role of the states in the system.

Meanwhile, Westcott utilizes Kenneth Waltz’s (1959) three levels of analysis to tell this story from the perspective of the individual, domestic public, and international level of analysis.¹ The first level looks at leaders’ assessments (90), the domestic focuses on which institutions require consent and input and the bureaucracy and political pressure from within (90–91), while the international level of analysis focuses on a “state’s subjective strategic culture and context” (91). Using a neoclassical realist framework, he illustrates how political disputes over salient stakes take on a life of their own and become bigger than individual states or personalities: they also involve the input of domestic publics and the nature of power in the international system.

Joshi and Westcott both correctly identify the problem of modernity for many states vis-à-vis their borders: they are artificial manifestations left behind by prior governments and empires that have long since disappeared. But one thing Joshi does not clearly articulate is how the border dispute between India and China can be applied to cases elsewhere. However, Westcott’s framework can easily be applied to other border disputes.

Chapter 2 of Joshi’s story starts during the British Raj, as the author tells the story in a chronological format. Joshi provides greater historical detail regarding the dispute than Westcott due to their different frameworks. For example, both Joshi and Westcott describe the delimitation of the McMahon Line during the imperial era to mark the extent of British claims, a line that the Chinese still vehemently oppose. However, Joshi highlights that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) claims land far beyond that, encompassing the greatest expanse of China during the Qing Dynasty, whereas this detail is missing in Westcott’s story. Both authors retell the story of Jawaharlal Nehru’s soft approach to China during the 1950s, which only hardened as the PRC gained territory at little cost and forcefully brought Tibet into “China.” Joshi focuses more on Nehru’s personality, while Westcott’s focus is on how Nehru’s leadership style sidelined by the Ministries of External Affairs and Defense.

According to Joshi, Beijing frequently proposed “package deals” that fit within the PRC’s national security framework during early negotiations. However, China backed off from these proposals before they could be agreed upon. This eventually led to the 1962 Sino-Indian War, in which China decisively defeated the Indian Army. Westcott divides their retelling of the lead-up to the war into four chapters, with the historical focus in Chapter 2, followed by the first, second, and third levels of analysis of the various timeframes.

In Chapter 3 Joshi turns to the surprise agreement that shaped the next 17 peaceful years. In Chapters 4–6 he details the intervening years of the situation in the leadup to the Galwan Incident. However, Chapter 7 is an excellent retelling of the difficult of fighting in the cold, unforgiving environment of the Himalaya, much of it at 14,000 feet or higher. Chapter 8 tells the story of how India’s neighbor and ally Bhutan also has ongoing disputes with China and must rely heavily on India for defense, only inflaming tensions on the Sino-Indian border. This part of the story is untold by Westcott and adds another layer of complexity. In Chapter 10 Joshi ties the current violence to the coming to power of Xi Jinping in 2012, laying much of the blame on his assertiveness, a claim that Westcott marginally disagrees with, owing to the input of the Politburo and other Chinese stakeholders.

Throughout his book, Joshi makes several bold editorial-esque claims. One is that “China has stopped viewing India as an equal” (24). He places this within the framework of China’s economic rise and its obsession with national security. In fact, at the end of the first chapter he makes his boldest claim: the PRC presently sees itself as atop the hierarchy of Asia and that other Asian states should answer to them. He claims that this was not once the case and that while China and India viewed one another suspiciously, contemporary politics have moved beyond sov-
ereign equality. One of the biggest questions that emerges from this claim is: how do other states respond? It is a question Joshi does not answer and it is a path that Westcott does not walk down. In fact, one of the major problems with Joshi’s piece is that it is a story told largely from the Indian perspective, with most sources being Indian. Partially due to the difficulty in getting information from senior Chinese officials, Joshi’s book would perhaps best be accompanied with reading a book written from the Chinese perspective.

Another claim by Joshi is that what some scholars see as nationalization of Indian politics is instead an answer to the nationalistic rhetoric of an ascendent China. This feeds precisely into the story told by Westcott: border disputes often take on a life of their own and become as much about strategic competition as about the intrinsic value of the border itself. One thing Joshi fails to do that Westcott does a better job of is articulating how this border dispute can inform territorial disputes in Asia or elsewhere.

Westcott’s framework is based on the idea that there are three ways to deal with a border dispute: escalate, compromise, or recognize another’s claims. As Westcott tells it, given the differences between China and India, only the maintenance of the status quo is likely. Additionally, he maintains that there are three core concepts in recognizing the border’s importance: states always seek to hold-on to territory, the border may be geostrategic outside of its actual value, and normative concerns of power and prestige must be considered. This is a framework that is absent from Joshi’s journalistic retelling of the story.

Much like Joshi, Westcott’s Chapter 2 begins with the historical context of how the dispute emerged, with special emphasis placed on the specious claims by both states, though he agrees with Joshi that initially India was conciliatory towards China. However, Westcott departs from Joshi here in that he utilizes more non-Indian sources in the telling of the dispute.

In Chapter 3, Westcott outlines the importance of border disputes and the value added by neoclassical realism. In Chapter 4, he turns to the individual level of analysis, detailing first the role of Mao Tse-tung and Deng Xiaoping in China and then the role of Nehru in Indian politics. Unlike Joshi, he ties the personalities of the leaders into Waltz’s second and third images in what can best be described as leadership styles. In turn, these affected the role of domestic stakeholders. As he clearly states, he does not just want to explain the dispute, but why it has remained intractable (75), though he does not want to offer prescriptions (289–92).

In Chapter 5, Westcott turns to the domestic publics/stakeholders and argues that the different structures within China and India affect what and how they bargain. In India, the world’s largest democracy, much of this now rests with the
Ministry of External Affairs, in contrast to China, which has militarized the issue. Here, he seems to agree with Joshi. Westcott goes so far as to claim a “state’s institutions determine who the salient actors are by establishing a formal hierarchy” (167).

In Chapter 6, Westcott turns to the nature of international politics. He maintains that two factors embedded within “strategic culture” (237) matter: a state’s image of itself and its perception of the international system. Using this normative framework may be difficult because, as he admits, a state’s strategic culture is not monolithic (237). This is Westcott’s attempt to deal with the “black box of the state” problem, an issue that Joshi does not address.

Westcott also claims that states are more willing to pursue status quo policies when they have border disputes because of the interactions between the three levels of analysis (233). However, Westcott fails to acknowledge the simpler explanation that a state might not have the material power with which to change the status quo. This, then, is not a lack of strategic culture, but a lack of brute physical power. While a more parsimonious and traditionally realist explanation, it certainly would not carry the depth of the explanation offered by Westcott.

The inclusion of Joshi’s book in a broader course on Indo-Chinese relations or a non-South China Sea–focused South Asian course would be helpful. The inclusion of anecdotal comments by high-ranking officials due to his journalistic stance is certainly a contribution. However, a stronger theoretical grounding or tying in of the case to the larger geopolitical consequences of the border dispute would make this text more appealing to a broader audience. Situating his argument next to a book from the Chinese perspective, such as Liu Xuecheng’s (1993/2011) works would also help balance Joshi’s largely Indian retelling of the dispute.

Furthermore, not enough attention is paid to how this border dispute affects geopolitics in the larger world. And this is the gap that other works such as Westcott’s can fill. Westcott’s contribution is the telling of the same story within the framework of the levels of analysis. In addition to filling the gap between theory and history, Westcott’s contribution is his systemization of the dispute. This theoretical perspective is an important contribution to both the border and conflict literatures as well as the regional literature on South Asia. An extremely well-organized book that is systematic in its approach, it is an excellent addition to a course on conflict, South Asia, or the nature of border disputes and geography.  

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