

Book Review

India and Asia's Changing Balance of Power

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Harsh V. Pant and Yogesh Joshi- The US Pivot and Indian Foreign Policy: Asia's Evolving Balance of Power, Palgrave Macmillan. 2016.

At a time when President Donald Trump's Asia policy appears to be in flux, it is New Delhi which seems to have given a clear call that it would like to see the Asian security architecture that is "transparent, balanced and inclusive." Prime Minister Narendra Modi has on various international forums – reiterated that international norms, including freedom of navigation should be the key to govern the "Indo-Pacific". Clearly, with the global power axis shifting away from the Pacific-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific region, new power alliances seem to be emerging, and New Delhi wants to play a greater role in shaping it. The rapid expansion of trade, investment and production linkages in the area spanning the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions has given rise to what is now known as the Indo-Pacific geo-strategic arc. Geospatially, the Indo-Pacific is the home to over 3.5 billion people, the combined GDP of over \$20 trillion. The region signifies a combination of Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Rim countries. It also has three of the four largest economies in the world, i.e. China, Japan and India. The Indian Ocean holds two maritime trade gateways: the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca, and accounts for around 85 percent of the world's maritime trade, primarily in the form of oil passing through it. Significantly, 65 percent of the world's oil reserves are with just 10 of the Indian Ocean littoral states.

The shift in New Delhi's foreign policy approach has to a large extent come as a response to China's rise in Asia, and its expanding footprints in the Indian Ocean. While China has so far not formally adopted the term Indo-Pacific, its large naval presence in its eastern edge and its increasing naval movements in the Indian Ocean reflect its strategic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. With its Maritime Silk Road (MSR) plan, China expects to improve connections between sea and land routes from China to ports in South and Southeast Asia,

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ostensibly to reduce dependence on maritime trade passing through the congested and potentially insecure 'choke point' of the Straits of Malacca. China is also flexing its muscle in the South China Sea. Scholars believe that given China's logistical build up on the Himalayan borders as well as on the sea, New Delhi should look sea-wards for a countervailing maritime strategy.

The book under review , *The US Pivot and Indian Foreign Policy: Asia's Evolving Balance of Power*, by Harsh V. Pant and Yogesh Joshi critically examines India's response to the US pivot in the era of transition of power. The book has six chapters. The introduction deals with concepts such as hedging, power transition and strategic flux. Chapter two narrates the US declining power and the origins of the US 'pivot' strategy . This is followed by a discussion on China's rise and its challenges, both globally and regionally. The third chapter then brings out Indo-US relations, highlights how this relationship has undergone a qualitative shift over the past decades. Chapter four discusses India-China rivalry in various theatres – from territorial to a power struggle in South Asia, East Asia , Indian Ocean. It also touches upon the critical China-Pakistan strategic partnership. The Chapters -five and six - examine India's relations with Japan , South Korea , Australia , Vietnam, Indonesia and Singapore.

India's China Challenge

India's China challenge further gets compounded by the fact that China already has a significant presence in its neighbourhood , particularly Pakistan . China and Pakistan are believed to be 'all-weather' friends, and Beijing has pledged \$51 billion in investments and development projects, including the China -Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) plan. China now also wants the CPEC to be extended to Afghanistan. The CPEC is a most important project as it is the most strategic in connecting China's western provinces to West Asia, that could eventually become a large regional hub connecting Iran, Afghanistan, the five Central Asian countries, Russia, and East Africa. Moreover, CPEC will help connect China's north-western Xinjiang province to the Gwadar port in the Arabian Sea. The CPEC goes through the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and is in violation of India's legal sovereignty over the area. But Beijing has gone all out to build it and in the process guard Islamabad's patronage of the terror network.

China has realized the significance of three necessities--a strong economy, maritime space and unrestrained energy supply to become a great power. Undoubtedly , the implications for India of the strategic nexus between China and Pakistan are extensive and serious. Not only it undermines security in different ways in the region, but also gives value to Pakistan as Beijing's strategic surrogate. And, under China's shield, Pakistan is 'masking

malevolence with duplicity' thereby promoting terror in neighbourhood. With 'rising' China, the most likely challenge in Indo-Pacific is that of uncertainty regarding the security of the Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs). This has raised significant concerns for other major regional players such as India, Japan, and the United States, prompting new partnerships among the major countries, given their convergence of interests in the Indo-Pacific security architecture. The United States also wants to re-balance its Asia strategy. The US President Barack Obama had earlier in 2011 announced the strategy of pivoting towards the region. India has become an important constituent in this 'pivoting' strategy. The question is : how should India be responding to this China 'challenge'? Should New Delhi adopt a strategy of 'balancing' or 'hedging' China ?

The book argues that international systemic factors propel India to adopt a strategy wherein India should be closely working with the US to 'balance' an assertive and rising China. 'Balancing' does not necessarily mean that India should enter into a military alliances with countries. However, the author also regrets that New Delhi does not seem to be adopting the strategy of 'balancing' China in its foreign policy praxis. Rather, New Delhi seems to be 'hedging' China , which may not necessarily work. 'Hedging' means pursuing two opposite policies and contradictory policies: balancing and engagement. The reasons for India adopting a 'hedging' strategy range from India's own domestic politics to the lack of a clear US policy vis-à-vis Asia. The authors assert that India has adopted a three-pronged strategy to 'hedge' China. First, by reconfiguring its relations with the US. Second, by improving relations with China (which has proved futile as we have witnessed on several occasion in our dealings with China including the Doklam crisis), and third, by strengthening its ties with regional powers like Japan, South Korea and ASEAN countries. India's foreign policy during the various dispensations : from the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh until the Prime Minister Modi 1.0 led National Democratic Alliance , has pursued the policy of 'hedging' China .However, the authors believe that India should endorse the 'pivot' and enter into an alliance with the US to balance against rising and an assertive China whose policies undermine India's interests.

There are many who share this view . An illustrative example is that of Rajesh Rajagopalan who believes that India's 'hedging' strategy may not work with China. As he writes : " It (hedging) will satisfy neither China nor the partners (US) that India hopes to balance China with. China is in any case unlikely to trust India, materially the best endowed state in China's neighborhood. Indeed, after this shift, there is little indication that China has in any way moderated its containment and balancing effort against India: little indication of pausing the military build-up in Tibet or expanding into the Indian Ocean, no give on multilateral forums such as the Nuclear Supplier's Group (NSG) or on the Masood Azhar issue at the UN,

and no moderation of its support to Pakistan. And this is perfectly natural: India is asking China to trust its words, not its actions. Second, India's shift towards hedging will reduce the confidence of India's potential partners, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. New Delhi worries about the constancy of its partners, but it should recognise that this is an equally valid concern for others. Any perception of India's unreliability as a partner would make it difficult to build the Asian balance that New Delhi claims to want." He further argues: "Balancing China does not mean India cannot have civil diplomatic ties or trade and other interactions with China or even cooperate with China on issues of common concern, such as trade. What balancing China means is developing the capacity and linkages to counter China's political and military efforts against India. This requires building up India's defence capacity, but even more so, it requires bringing together a group of like-minded states who are willing to stand together to support each other in the international arena when they become targets of China's ire or worse."

With Prime Minister Modi returning to power, New Delhi may be able to formulate a more clear and assertive foreign policy. The indication for this has come with the invite to BIMSTEC members for the Prime Minister's swearing-in ceremony. Clearly, India's Act East policy is going to be pursued with more vigour. But while ASEAN would continue to be central to New Delhi, it will be the wider Indo-Pacific which will be at the heart of India's engagement. The Ministry of External Affairs has already made a strong statement by setting up a Indo-Pacific division in the Ministry. The US also has renamed its Pacific Command to the Indo-Pacific command. Modi 2.0 has made a strong statement, with the appointment of a scholar-diplomat Foreign Minister, S. Jaishankar. Clearly, this is an indication of New Delhi's resolve to re-calibrate its foreign policy apparatus keeping the changing strategic realities and 'rising' China in view. It is in this backdrop that the book by Harsh Pant and Yogesh Joshi has become an indispensable read.