

## **BOOK REVIEW**

E. Sridharan (ed.), *Eastward Ho? India's Relations with the Indo-Pacific*, (Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad, India, 2021) Pages: 512 (HB), Price: 1,650.00

India's eastward engagement in the Indo-Pacific arena has been taking place since ancient times. India's relationship with the Indo-Pacific region has been witnessing dramatic growth as intra-Asian economic integration deepens.

India enjoys a unique geographical location, has seen civilisational evolutions and historical transformations that have opened up possible roles and options for the growing regional power. However, there are security tensions and rivalries due to the economic and strategic rise of China. The Indo-Pacific concept in India's foreign relations has been considered crucial; however, despite this, there is a paucity of serious literature on the subject. The new book, *Eastward Ho? India's Relationship with the Indo-Pacific*, is a timely addition in this regard.

The book offers a bird's eye view of both India striving to establish relationships with the countries lying to its east, and the challenges it has to encounter. It seeks to look at possible roles and options for India against the backdrop of deepening intra-Asian economic integration, and security tensions and rivalries related to the economic and strategic rise of China. The book is part of the Strategic Studies Series (edited by Harsh Pant, Chris Ogden, T.V. Paul, Yogesh Joshi, and Frank O' Donnell) which aims to underscore political, economic, and socio-cultural relations and issues in South Asia, and beyond. It focuses on contemporary trends in the region using historical contexts, and includes theoretical and policy-oriented writings.

The book chronicles the narrative of India's relationship with the Indo-Pacific, and is divided into four parts. Part I looks at the rise of China, and the overall strategic and economic scenario to India's East. Part II deals with India's attempt at managing the rise of China by forging new East Asian partners. Part III is about India's economic relations with the Eastern rim of South Asia - Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar - and focuses on Sino-Indian tussle for influence over the Himalayan states of Nepal and Bhutan. Part IV concludes by analysing India's evolving strategic and economic relations with Southeast Asia. The book is contemporary, and documents exhaustively the conceptualisation and initiation of India's Act East Policy announced by the Modi government in 2014, which began a new era in India's relationship with the East, and has been marked by a more vigorous approach towards high-level exchanges. The book looks closely at the China factor in India's eastward engagement. China's assertiveness in territorial issues, and its aggressive thrust in terms of the Belt and Road initiative, have put Beijing in an influential position in the region.

The first chapter by E. Sridharan explains India's overall approach towards the Indo-Pacific in the context of 'Trade Integration and Security Rivalries' and also engages with the literature on power transitions and rising powers. It poses questions regarding the strategic consequences of the economic

integration of Asia and the economic consequences of the absence of a security consensus in Asia. The chapter poses the larger geopolitical question of what kind of power India will be in the future. It argues that the direction of Indian foreign policy will be substantially dependent on US-China dynamics in the region, and that India's gradual shift towards the USA and its allies and partners will continue. It concludes that India's option should be to ensure that it narrows the gap with China in the fields of economic growth as well as military modernisation.

The next chapter by Swaran Singh, 'The Evolving Asian Security Architecture' talks about the role of the Chinese rise in creating a pan-Asian economic infrastructure, India's co-option by building closer ties with ASEAN, and streamlining various processes of South Asian integration through BIMSTEC, G-20, BRICS, and SCO. In 'China's Perceptions of India', Srikanth Kondapalli talks about the growing economic interdependence between China and India on the one hand, their cooperation in the G-20 summits, and joint setting up of fora like BRICS, and AIIB. On the other hand, contentious territorial issues have raised a bar between bilateral relations. Chinese overtures in the Indian Ocean, CPEC initiatives, and India's Act East Policy and focus on the South China Sea have evoked security concerns in both China and India. Both the chapters delve into how nationalist and assertive trends in both countries have opened the turf for an explicit conflict in the future.

Part II deals with 'Managing the Rise of China', and looks at India's relationship with countries like Japan and Korea. H. S. Prabhakar talks about the growing relationship between India and Japan with their exceptional consensus over a critical maritime connection, growing international responsibilities, rule of law, and an open global trade regime. The symmetry in Modi's 'Made in India' and Abe's 'Abenomics' to transform Japan's economy to revive domestic growth is a strong foundation in their relationship. They have engaged in multilateral or trilateral engagement with other countries in the region based on specific agendas. The success of their partnership is based on the development of a stable, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific order.

The chapter on 'India and Korea' by Vyjayanti Raghavan, also shows how India and Korea are constructively working at a high leadership level towards a broader global engagement, pursuing 'Act East' and 'New Southern' policies. China is a common cause of concern for both countries, which also opens opportunities for the two countries to collaborate in the area of joint

maritime search and rescue exercises, anti-piracy programmes, space technology, personnel exchanges, and pieces of training. It is up to India to play a more important role in the region, especially as countries in the region become increasingly wary of China and are looking for support and an alternative.

Part III focuses on India's relationship within South Asia as Chinese tussle for influence grows. In the chapter '*Politics on the Strategic Himalayas*', Sangeeta Thapliyal looks at the current relationship of New Delhi and Beijing with Nepal and Bhutan. She traces the mythological significance of the Himalayas for India, and how the relationship with these countries has evolved through the influence of geostrategy and geopolitics. Nepal is emerging as a market for China, with Beijing being actively involved in the development of infrastructure, rail, and road links. China has also developed ties with Nepali politicians and army chiefs, even as Indian outreach has weakened. Even though relations remain cautious, there have been direct talks between Bhutan and China on the border settlement issue; Beijing has also attempted to establish contact with the political elite. In China's assessment, the emerging Asian order - with China and India competing for growth - would involve vying for influence in the Himalayan region. In '*Changing Contours of India-Sri Lanka Relations*', P. Sahadevan talks about Sri Lanka which, despite its small geographical size, has been able to manoeuvre a relationship with both the countries, and is vying to limit the strategic depths being attempted by Beijing and New Delhi alike.

Shibhashis Chatterjee discusses India-Bangladesh relations in terms of promises made by the Indian government on development issues, water sharing, migration, and a crackdown on terrorism. He states that the ultimate challenge for India-Bangladesh relations is to move away from geopolitical determinism towards human security and economic prosperity. Bangladesh's polarising domestic politics make it difficult for India to invoke confidence-building measures, and encourages Bangladesh to search for external security guarantees. In the final chapter of the third part, Shankari Sundaraman takes a critical look at India's eastward engagement in her chapter on '*India-Myanmar Relations*'. The Chinese presence in the region remains a cloud on how the relationship is developing. Moreover, the issues of ethnicity and the plight of the Indian community in Myanmar have problematised the situation. Along with this, the 2021 military takeover in Myanmar is a serious setback to the democratic political movement that was welcomed by India. The border issues and connectivity setbacks highlight security challenges on both sides of the border, and require more robust bilateral ties.

The fourth section follows India's historical, strategic, and economic relations with Southeast Asia. Lawrence Prabhakar looks at the 'Evolving Dynamics of India-Singapore Security and Economic Relations'. While Singapore has straddled the US order and the increasing Chinese dominance in the region, the interests of Singapore and India converge. Both the countries are forging strategies to create a dynamic Indo-Pacific vision. Reena Marwah discusses Thailand, calling it 'A Bridge for India to Act East'. For this, India needs to improve the infrastructure and connectivity in its North East. The relationship between the two countries includes trade, combating terrorism, crime, drugs, and human trafficking. India needs to realize that its relationship with Thailand will help in offsetting Chinese presence in the land and maritime space. A half-hearted commitment to the policy has restricted India's influence in the region. The need of the hour is thus to scale up the cultural, economic, and strategic engagement with Thailand and the rest of the region. The author has also contributed another chapter: 'The Philippines Archipelago and Intersecting Interests'. She talks about how the Philippines is trying to soft-balance China. China is the Philippines' fourth-largest trading partner. Even as the SCS ruling was given in favour of Indonesia, the country decided not to go ahead with the ruling, in return for economic doles from China. Even as Indian trade and investment show encouraging signs in the Philippines, they cannot match the Chinese presence in the Filipino economy. Both countries share several commonalities in the name of anti-colonialism, South-South cooperation, a strong democratic polity, and an independent judiciary and press, the relations between the two countries have remained unexplored. India needs to make itself more visible within the ASEAN countries, and must also leverage the strength of its soft power through Ramayana, Buddhism, tourism, and Bollywood.

Baladas Ghoshal has contributed two chapters: 'Vietnam in India's Foreign Policy', and 'India-Malaysia Relations in the Post-Cold War Period'. He talks about India and Vietnam being natural allies, working to ensure the freedom of navigation and open sea lanes of communication, defence ties, and energy security. However, he recognises that both countries cannot afford an open conflict with China, and therefore must avoid provoking Beijing. Malaysia also remains the core of India's Act East policy as the two countries share close cultural ties. However, Malaysian foreign policy has been influenced by Pakistan's anti-India propaganda, and Islam plays a crucial role in their bilateral relations. The Malaysian Prime Ministers' scathing speech on India after the abrogation of Article 370, and India's retaliation does not throw good light. The new government in Malaysia is trying to balance ties; but India needs to

move up the diplomatic chain considering challenges from Pakistan and Chinese diplomacy.

In the last chapter, Shankari Sundararaman writes about Indo-Indonesia relations encompassing various segments, such as strategic engagement, defence and security, comprehensive economic partnership, cultural links, and responding to common challenges. Within the changing economic order, both share a convergence of interests in terms of promoting reforms within organisations like the WTO and G-20 which will address the risks of globalisation for developing countries. However, more needs to be done in terms of the maritime challenges that both countries face. The region is yet to see India's role as a credible security provider, and its role needs to be strategically advanced and implemented.

The book identifies various elements of India's Indo-Pacific approach, and looks deeply into India's partnerships in East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Each chapter delves into the economic, cultural, political, and geographical proximity of these countries to India. It underscores the need for New Delhi to expand its footprints across the region, in the wake of growing Chinese capacity and capital presence in the region. The context and timing of a thorough discussion regarding India's policy with the Indo-Pacific are very critical. This book is, therefore, an important contribution to the literature on the subject.

Dr. Shreya Upadhyay,  
Assistant Professor,  
Christ (Deemed to be) University,  
Bangaluru.