


BOOK REVIEW

China and the Indo-Pacific: Maneuvers and Manifestations

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The concept of China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region has garnered significant attention and concern from various countries, particularly the United States and its key allies. While some argue that China's rise in the region is a natural result of its expanding economy, others contend it is driven by a strategic desire to extend its influence and control. As highlighted by Denisov and colleagues, China's economic clout in the region makes it a significant rival to the United States (Gul *et al.*, 2022). This growing concern has led to a new geographic concept, the Indo-Pacific, which encompasses a broader scope than the traditional Asia-Pacific region (Koga, 2022). The Indo-Pacific concept recognizes the interconnectedness of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean and highlights the strategic significance of this maritime space (Scott, 2013). Therefore, it has gained traction as a way to understand and address the complex dynamics in the region. The emergence of this geopolitical imagining underscores the need for countries in the region to reassess their strategies and alliances. Consequently, various nations have started formulating new foreign policies and strategies to effectively respond to the contemporary dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region, particularly China (Darwis, 2020). *China and Indo-Pacific: Maneuvers and Manifestations* is composed of eleven chapters casting a spotlight on this vast theatre, and presents a multi-faceted analysis encompassing the interests, strategies, and roles of various regional stakeholders.

The introductory chapter by Swaran Singh and Reena Marwah starts with the proposition that China has embraced the Indo-Pacific concept while continuing to use Asia-Pacific terminology. Its engagement with the region is multifaceted, led by its economic ascension since the early 1990s, which has revealed novel visions of its previous glory as the "Middle Kingdom," navigating its desire to restore its rightful position in the world (p. 3). It has become the region's "largest trading partner," which may complicate and blur lines of mutual containment and engagement, posing a challenge to the region's governments while also providing opportunities for economic growth and participation, sometimes referred to as "cheque book diplomacy" through the BRI. This external engagement prompted a response from regional players as well as foreign powers such as the United States, who have all been navigating their strategies vis-à-vis China.

Dattesh D. Parulekar in chapter 2 highlights the emerging strategic vistas in the Indo-Pacific region which could become mainstays of cooperation or competitiveness, such as commercial security, tech-sovereignty, and sustainable development. These dimensions of power accretion are "visible in fault-lines of counterpoises of a 'Pax Sinica' ordering, and the juxtaposition of an Indo-Pacific community weltanschauung" (p. 23) perpetuating stress in the region. This has called for "convergent axes" leading to various initiatives in the region such as the Economic Prosperity Network (EPN) (p. 24), Blue Dot Network (BDN) (p. 27), and the Supply Chains Resilience Initiative (SCRI). The author contends that "razor's edge" rivalry and the pandemic experience of the United States,

Japan, India, and Australia resulted in various measures and frameworks to oppose China's economic power in the region, such as the G7, D10, and T10. In terms of sustainable development, the "One Sun, One World, One Grid" aims to create a global electricity grid using solar energy in the region. Overall, this chapter provides an in-depth study of China's engagement and reactions in the Indo-Pacific region, emphasizing the fact that it is "poised to make the most substantive stab for veritable comprehensive national power in human history."

Chapter 3 explores the strategic competition between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific through the prism of the "complex interdependence" theory. Rubina Waseem goes on to argue that while the US and China are economically and politically intertwined in the region, their differences produce a power asymmetry in the region where China dominates. Although multilateral platforms such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) allow regional actors and the US to pursue and cooperate on common interests, the largest shareholder – China – dominates these platforms. Consequently, the US which is committed to its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" is trying to access the region's market through the "Access Asia outreach program" connecting thousands of US companies in the region (p. 45). Furthermore, US strategic involvement in the region includes maintaining a strong military presence, promoting sustainable economic growth, and enhancing strategic dialogue. The author notes certain limitations of the theory while acknowledging its relevance for assessing the competition and its impact on the evolving multilateralism across the Indo-Pacific region.

Chapter 4 delves into drivers and obstacles in Sino-Japanese relations in the Indo-Pacific region. According to Stephen R. Nagy, despite their contentious political relationship, both countries' relations were guided by the "*seikei bunri*" (p. 58) formula that separated politics and economics, allowing them to focus on economic relations while avoiding the more sensitive political aspects of their relation. However, China's growing economic and military power has led to a shift in its thinking about Japan. This thinking has been partly fueled by growing resentment in China over the large trade deficit that emerged in their bilateral relations in the 1980s. Additionally, certain critical junctures have deteriorated their relations and tested the validity of the "*seikei bunri*" formula, such as the 1994 nuclear test conducted by China; the 1996 Taiwan strait crisis; the 2010 fisherman incident near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands; the 2012 nationalizations of Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands by Japan; Militarization of South China Sea (SCS) and the negation of permanent court of arbitration decision in 2016 by China. Consequently, participating in the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) helps Japan to balance what is seen as China's aggressive stance, it also presents a potential inflexion point in the "*seikei bunri*" formula. Nonetheless, the author believes that there are chances for the two nations to develop a more stable and cooperative relationship, especially in light of regional issues such as climate change and public health.

In chapter 5, Don McLain Gill emphasizes the significance of retaining the centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The ASEAN construct of the Indo-Pacific is not fixed, he argues but is subject to multiple interpretations influenced by various factors such as geopolitical interest, economic consideration, and historical legacies. This creates challenges and conflicting interests among stakeholders in the region. Further, the chapter discusses Indonesia's involvement in shaping the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), in which ASEAN is envisioned as connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans while functioning as a pivot or "fulcrum" for norm-setting (p. 81). However, geopolitical competition between the US and China presents formidable challenges in the region because of the varying interest within the Southeast Asian bloc encouraged by China. ASEAN operates on consensus-based decisions, where one member's veto is sufficient to withhold the initiative. As a result, China has gained a significant strategic advantage by maintaining political clout over ASEAN members such as Cambodia, Laos, and Brunei, posing challenges to ASEAN unity. Gill highlights the importance of ASEAN's normative power dynamics in maintaining its centrality in the region and emphasizes maintaining ASEAN unity through the ASEAN Way.

In chapter 6, Claudia Astarita looks into the European Union's (EU) vision and strategy for collaboration, which attempted to analyze the actual economic potential associated with the new geopolitical

imagination – the Indo-Pacific – and its multilateral framework. The EU is increasing its involvement with China, balancing economic interests with concerns about China’s human rights record and growing assertiveness in the region. With this aim, it is pushing for a third pole in the US–China confrontation that will be multilateral, norms issue-driven, and inclusive to avoid further deterioration of rivalry. Consequently, it has adopted a “middle-ground” approach to the Indo-Pacific region that can represent the interests of a cohort of countries that cannot individually assert themselves as powerful trendsetters in the regionalization process (p. 111). This can help to promote a “rules-based international order” and maintain stability in the region, while also promoting economic growth and development. However, there has been some conflict among EU member states, with each member pursuing their own foreign policy and goals, but they all recognize the need to work together to maintain a rules-based international order and stability. Furthermore, post-Brexit, the United Kingdom considers the Indo-Pacific as a critical region and aspires to be “the European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific” (p. 113). To summarize, the EU’s involvement in the Indo-Pacific will become more complex in the coming years.

The key to understanding the Australian approach to the Indo-Pacific is the “middle-power” mindset which has dominated its foreign policy, as analyzed by Artyom A. Garin in chapter 7. The evolution of the Sino–U.S. conflict has made the regional environment significantly more varied and complicated, forcing Australia to be flexible and sensitive to changes in the evolving balance of power. In economic terms, multilateralism has become a major component of national power, as well as the backbone of defense modernization and soft power for middle powers such as Australia, which seeks to avoid uncertainty and streamline cooperation even in the face of a transformation in regional architecture. As a result of this transformation, strategic affairs of the region would increasingly be determined by the Asian countries themselves in which China would be the main catalyst. Garin outlines two scenarios for multilateralism: “selected multilateralism” and “balanced multilateralism” (p. 139), highlighting the latter one in which middle powers will be able to coordinate more to present a single regional voice.

In chapter 8, Devendra Kumar Bishnoi analyzes the significance of China’s narrative of the “Community of Shared Future (CSF)” in the context of the Indo-Pacific region, which could be seen as a counter-narrative to the US-led “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP). China’s approach to the Indo-Pacific is based on its opposition to what it sees as a US-led regional order that seeks to contain China’s rise as a global power, whereas its concept of CSF is guided by various factors such as geoeconomics, security, and the desire to project itself as a responsible global power. CSF wants to establish a global system that must be free of the military alliances that formerly characterized the Cold War divide. It tries to foster a community-based approach to regional order based on mutual respect and common interests. Bishnoi underlines the need for the region to move beyond this contentious narrative and build a shared view of the regional order that satisfies the interests of all of the region’s major powers. The region’s destiny will be determined by how these narratives are resolved and how major powers reconcile their material interests with normative principles.

In chapter 9, Mrityika Guha Sarkar examines the conceptual undercurrents of China’s regional engagement in relation to the Quadrilateral Security Framework (Quad) tryst with the Indo-Pacific. Quad consists of like-minded democracies – the United States, Japan, Australia, and India – who unequivocally endorse the concept of FOIP. The chapter explains that China has become the nerve center for the global supply chain, and has been pioneering the manufacturer of not only traditional but also cutting-edge technologies. As a result, it has leveraged its key position to aid nations suffering from catastrophic epidemics like Covid-19 (p. 179). It has also expanded its naval capacities through its “Maritime Silk Road” initiative allowing it greater maneuverability in the region to counter the multinational naval drills and other freedom of navigation operations, especially those conducted by the navy of the Quad countries. Consequently, Quad is diversifying away from China-centric global supply chain networks to offset their economic over-dependence on Beijing and is revamping their Five Eyes intelligence network that includes Quad members (except India) plus Canada and New

Zealand. Sarkar argues that Quad, to some extent, has the potential to become a balancer to Xi's "Community of Shared Future for Mankind."

Madhura Bane addresses a long-ignored issue in Pacific Island Countries (PIC) in chapter 10, where China has approached through trade agreements, diplomatic exchanges, and infrastructure development. However, the PICs' reactions have been uneven, with some embracing Chinese investment and aid and others concerned about debt traps and environmental harm linked with China. Nevertheless, PICs have found a rejuvenated interest in global power calculus due to its strategic location and natural resources. China's diplomatic participation in the Pacific is motivated by the desire to weaken Taiwan's engagement in the region, consequently, it has conducted a systematic and effective diplomatic campaign to isolate and prostrate the country (p. 203). Bane observes that China's security agreement with the Solomon Islands would construct a Chinese naval base that may be used to interdict military reinforcement for Taiwan, while information collection and the presence of patrols might undermine Australia's and the United States' defense strategy. In summary, the chapter observes that the geopolitics of the greater Indo-Pacific region has shifted attention to the PICs, which present both new possibilities and challenges to its old and new partner states, who are increasingly striving to achieve their respective foreign policy objectives.

The last chapter of the book by Reena Marwah and Abhishek Verma delineates China's multidimensional engagement in South Asia. This engagement stems from the void left by the limited significance of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). South Asia is linked by a common colonial history, and for China, the region holds far greater historical and strategic significance. China is building infrastructure such as railways, canals, gas pipelines, and electrical connections to South Asian countries while also implementing projects quickly, supplementing India's brand of participation, often accused of being slow to implement. Furthermore, the authors delve into bilateral relationships between various South Asian nations. Concerning India-China relations, border skirmishes along an undefined "Line of Actual Control" have impeded their relationship culminating in many crises such as the 2014 Depsang border dispute, the 2017 Doklam crisis, and the 2020 Galwan issue. With Afghanistan, China's interest is driven by its concern of close connection between the Taliban and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) – an extremist group of Uyghur militants. China's interaction with Pakistan is multidimensional whereas its soft power influence is obvious in Bhutan, and there is an enormous web of institutions in Nepal to influence its internal political dynamics in China's favor (p. 229). In Bangladesh, China has adopted an "all-of-a-society approach" which includes building cultural bridges through Confucius institutions (p. 230). In Sri Lanka, it has invested heavily in infrastructure, particularly in Hambantota port which has become a textbook example of a "Debt trap." Finally, domestic politics in the Maldives has been split between pro-China and pro-India themes. Overall, the chapter observes that China's participation in South Asia is fast expanding, with multifaceted influences aimed at building political and strategic incentives.

In this comprehensive exploration of the evolving geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific region, the book is rich with detail, weaving together various threads of international relations, economic considerations, normative power, and regional cooperation. The author's nuanced examination of the differing points of view and strategies of the nations involved paints a broad yet intricate picture of the highly dynamic and complex state of affairs. From discussions on the United States and Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy to the concept of "ASEAN Centrality," the EU's balancing act, Australia's "middle power" approach, China's "Community of Shared Future," and its "multidimensional engagement" in South Asia, the analyses delve deep into each player's motivations. The primary focus of the book revolves around the dynamic of strategic competition between the United States and China, particularly in the context of China's escalating ambitions within the Indo-Pacific region. The narrative underscores the imperative of upholding a rule-based order in this vast geographical region. The book looks deeply into the strategic maneuvers employed by many Indo-Pacific nations, with China acting as the essential determinant influencing their approaches. This book is a remarkable examination of the multilayered geopolitics currently in play. According to Kaplan, "Geography is

the backdrop to human history itself.” The author echoes this sentiment, painting a vivid panorama of interrelated nations each vying for influence. With a discerning lens, the strategies of key players are inspected, and parallels are drawn between their maneuverings and those from historical geopolitical chess games. Yet, as described by Hurrell, power and rivalry aren’t the sole motivators for international relations. Upon this precisely woven tapestry, the author also tactfully brings to the fore cooperation and shared concerns beyond sovereignty and economic growth. Each chapter is a bold cruise, offering an enlightening view of the dynamic interplay of politics, economics, and diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region.

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