

The US Pivot and Indian Foreign Policy: Asia's Evolving Balance of Power, by Harsh V. Pant and Yogesh Joshi, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 154

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The US Pivot and Indian Foreign Policy is based on the premise of the ascendance of Chinese power and relative decline of the United States (US) on the world stage causing transition of power in international politics. Considering China's assertive behaviour, this power transition is unlikely to be peaceful inducing uncertainty in the system. By using the term 'balance of power' in the title itself, the authors seem to have suggested an emerging bipolar world order with the US and China being the two poles in the near future. Against this backdrop, the book has sought to study the US pivot to Asia and available Indian foreign policy options. It views India as 'a middle power' or 'a swing state' that is pursuing a three-pronged strategy to manage emerging strategic flux: developing a close partnership with the US, trying to stabilise relations with China, and forging local partnerships with other regional powers. The book ponders on these strategies.

The first chapter provides an overall background to the main theme of the book and its structure. In the second chapter, the authors have successfully built their case regarding the relative American decline, especially after the 2008 global financial crisis. Along with the shrinking US defence budget, US President Barack Obama's unsuccessful attempt to create a great power condominium—the 'G-2'—with China and 'the

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American power becoming a matter of debate' were indicators of its decline. The former strategy of accommodating 'a rising challenger' raised suspicion among Asian states about US intentions; further, this became the most important impediment to the 'pivot' strategy, not allowing it to realise its full potential. Both the G-2 and 'pivot' were exactly opposite strategies to contain China. Therefore, it has been argued that 'China's challenge to the post-Cold War Asian order has not been met with a coherent response from the US' (p. 22). Regarding Indian foreign policy options, the chapter contends that while 'the potential of conflict between the US and China is strategically advantageous for India, the transition of this potential into a real conflict is not' (p. 24). India, which considers itself 'a major power in international politics, second to none' (p. 23), prefers a multipolar world order. The US has also promoted India at the international stage and has been anticipating India to become a strategic partner for it, in managing negative consequences of the power transition. China, on the other hand, is delaying India's rise to the global order. The book states that 'China's rise has, for the first time, threatened India with a potential great power which is both geographically proximate and overtly hostile' (p. 28). Therefore, it is high time for India to act decisively as the current strategic flux has posed a unique challenge before it and its conceptual foreign policy foundations. While discussing the issue, the chapter has contended that the 'recent geo-strategic shifts in South Asia seem to be leading to the "emergence of an informal but tight alliance system" with India and US on one side and Pakistan and China on the other' (p. 26). However, such a proposition appears cursory as relations between these four countries are multi-layered and much more complex. Such contentions could have been avoided altogether or could have been explained in a more nuanced manner.

The third chapter discusses the emerging US-India partnership in the Asia-Pacific. Owing to its large debt burden as well as commitments across the globe, the US is pursuing a balancing strategy of a kind that has not been pursued before. From the Indian perspective, the lack of internal capacity to tackle China has left it with only the other option of external balancing. So, there has been a convergence of interests between the two countries. But as far as India is concerned, the opinion is divided—whether to go with the US as a strategic partner or maintain a hedging strategy to engage with all great powers simultaneously. The authors have driven the point that a hedging strategy embodied in the precepts of non-alignment may not prove sufficient for India to deal

with the current strategic flux in Asia; moreover, India will increasingly find it difficult to expect the US' unconditional support, which has been the case since the end of the Cold War and continues till today. This chapter goes on to examine Indian response to the US overtures under the decade-long United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and the current National Democratic Alliance (NDA) governments. The UPA government preferred to steer clear of the China–US rivalry. It remained unresponsive towards US proposals for cooperation in the defence sector, which adversely affected India's defence modernisation plan. The book asserts that 'Under the UPA government, Indian foreign policy toward the "pivot" was punctuated by reluctance and caution' (p. 45). The US–India relationship lost momentum and became moribund towards the end of UPA's second term. Things reversed after the Prime Minister Modi-led NDA government took office. The book emphasises that the 'coming of the BJP government pushed India's hedging strategy to an active partnership on the issue of the pivot' (p. 50). The NDA saw the convergence of interests in India's Act East policy and the US pivot to Asia. It accentuated on various terminologies, such as 'the threat to freedom of navigation', 'maritime security', 'rising territorial disputes,' as evident from number of joint statements between India and US. Modi set the ball rolling by taking up stalled proposals like Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI), civil nuclear cooperation, and an upgradation of the Malabar exercise, among others, thus infusing new energy in the relationship. The authors attribute this renewed vigor in the relations to the growing restlessness about China's rapid rise.

In the succeeding chapter, China has been described as an emerging great power in India's immediate frontiers. It declares that 'The emergence of the great power at its immediate frontiers now appears imminent' (p. 62). China's 'body language' towards India has largely been negative which manifests itself in a number of instances—its hesitation in accommodating India's concerns on the border issue, the China–Pakistan axis, the strategic maritime encirclement of India, and the reluctance to accept India in the global regimes and institutions. China's growing defence capabilities has also been a matter of concern for India. Still there have been few schools of thoughts in the Indian policy circles that do not look at China antagonistically. A policy document *Non-alignment 2.0* has also argued against being part of the 'anti-China containment ring' and is in favour of developing internal capabilities to counter the Chinese threat. However, the authors have strongly neutralised these liberal

arguments and have concluded that India continues to benefit from the America-led liberal security order and China's rise is posing problems before the country. They have pinpointed limitations in balancing China internally; furthermore, they have concluded that external balancing may be the only resort available and the 'pivot' represents an excellent opportunity for India.

While examining the UPA and NDA policies, the authors have observed that the UPA-II government had tried to normalise relations with China, especially in the wake of the financial crisis, at the cost of India's relations with the US hoping for concessions from China to settle outstanding issues with India. However, 'such an understanding was nothing but a "profound misreading of Beijing's sense of its own power" and a "terrible underestimation of the new Chinese determination to make good on its long-standing territorial claims everywhere, including those against India"' (p. 72). This strategy was reversed by Modi who took a strong position towards China. The NDA government openly embraced the US irrespective of 'what China might think'. The book claims that 'the Indian Leadership has been able to articulate to Beijing the fundamental problem which besets China's worldview: its urge for expansionism' (p. 75). Since then, India has been adopting an assertive hedging strategy, that is, normalising relations with Beijing but not at the expense of its other partnerships. However, most of the instances and actions that the authors have mentioned as 'an aggressive or a decisive stand against China' have merely been rhetorical without practical application.

The subsequent chapters review India's dealings with other regional powers, most importantly Japan. The fifth chapter lists common vulnerabilities that both India and Japan face vis-à-vis China. It describes the strategic embrace between India and Japan in recent years as a strategy 'to reduce vulnerabilities in security, economic and diplomatic spheres in the current power transition in Asia' (p. 84). The two countries have indulged in a triple hedge—defence partnership, economic partnership, and cooperation at multilateral forums. After 2008, there has been a rise in the diplomatic engagement between the two countries along with joint declarations clearly emphasising the apprehensions regarding the threat to freedom of navigation. Of late, both the countries are giving much more importance to the joint maritime exercises. In 2015, Japan became a permanent partner in the annual Malabar naval exercise, which hitherto had only India and the US as participating members.

In the economic arena, Japan has been encouraged to invest in Indian infrastructure. India is one of the largest recipients of Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA). The book affirms that 'investment in the Indian economy serves Japan's purposes (as) well. It allows dispersal of assets away from China, thereby decreasing the vulnerability of Japanese business' (p. 93). In addition to this, there has been increasing cooperation between the two countries at multilateral forums like the United Nations, East Asian Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). However, in spite of all this, there is no denying the fact that few grey areas in the relations still remain to be worked out—especially the US-2 amphibious aircrafts deal and civil nuclear cooperation issue. More importantly, even though the India–Japan strategic partnership is likely to continue in the foreseeable future, 'American support would remain pivotal in managing China's rise' (p. 98).

The sixth chapter discusses India's regional balancing strategy with other local Asian powers like Indonesia, Vietnam, Australia, South Korea and Singapore. Due to an identical strategic environment, these countries face similar challenges vis-à-vis China—such as, being wary of China's assertiveness, lack of internal capacity, depending on the freedom of navigation of the seas for their economic growth, and being beneficiaries of the US-led post-Cold War world order. Moreover, these countries are extremely relevant with respect to India's Act East policy, and they have expressed their interest with India's active involvement in the region. India's partnership with them also appear less threatening to China as compared to its partnership with the US. The chapter goes on to explain India's relations with each of these countries. It rightly concludes that the local balancing is not a substantive and effective answer to the vulnerabilities in this uncertain strategic environment. The conclusion stands vindicated for another reason as well. Since all of the middle powers mentioned in the chapter have strong economic linkages with China, no local balancer wants to be overtly antagonistic towards China. This may cause a prisoner's dilemma while taking a collective stand vis-à-vis China, which raises questions about its effectiveness. Additionally, 'whether India will be able to carry the burden of the expectations of its regional partners in balancing China remains an open question at this point' (p. 119).

In the concluding chapter, the authors have asserted that the US pivot to Asia strategy represents a significant opportunity for India. They seem to have preferred the Modi-led NDA government's three pronged strategy

‘without sacrificing one for the other’ (p. 126). They are of the firm view that India needs to engage with Beijing from the position of strength with an equal focus on the internal as well as external balancing, and for that matter ‘the relationship with the US will have to be pursued vigorously’ (p. 126). According to them, apart from foreign policy choices, India’s will, sense of purpose and intentions are also very important in order to come up with a coherent strategy in dealing with the current transition of power in Asia.

Overall, the submissions in the book resemble the neo-realist arguments—particularly offensive realism associated with John Mearsheimer. China’s attempts to maximise its security, its penchant for the dominance at the other state’s expense, its revisionist aggressive intentions in the South China Sea as well as across Himalayas, its thirst for expansionism, and its quest for hegemony perfectly fits into an offensive realist mould. However, this book’s contention that the US is trying to externally balance the rise of China exhibits defensive realism.

When the US announced the pivot to Asia, it had security and economic undertones attached to it. While this book has taken care of the former aspect, the latter aspect could also have been dealt with in more detail. There is no reference to the emerging Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, which is vital in terms of geo-economics. The whole concept of the ‘pivot’ has a strong maritime dimension associated with it. The book has, however, discussed the maritime issues in a limited manner. Besides that, there is an ongoing debate in the Indian foreign policy circles regarding the use of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’. Such constructs help countries identify their area of active engagement and their responsibility towards the region. The book has not touched upon the debate and has used the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ interchangeably with ‘Asia-Pacific’.

The authors have evaluated Indian foreign policy stances towards the ‘pivot’ during both the UPA and NDA regimes. However, they have not spoken about the internal political situations of the US and Japan during the same time. India has been able to instill a much needed momentum in its relations with these countries only because the governments in these countries also felt the need to engage India. Although India enjoys bipartisan support in both these countries, new dispensations in these countries may look at things differently in future. The constructivist theory of international relations defines international politics as ‘a sphere of interaction which is shaped by the actors’ identities and practices and influenced by constantly changing normative institutional structures.’²¹

Therefore, an analysis of the internal political developments in the US as well as Japan, and its impact on India, would have been helpful for the readers.

The well-reasoned arguments presented in the book have been corroborated with multiple examples. The book is useful for scholars, academics as well as interested ordinary citizens. The authors have come to a conclusion by objectively examining the available foreign policy options. Instead of getting trapped in old political precepts, such as 'non-alignment,' authors have focused on providing practical solutions to emerging problems. The book has been published when the NDA government has completed two years in office. Whether this government continues with the three-pronged strategy or alters it to manage the unfolding transition of the world order remains to be seen.

NOTE

1. Maysam Behraves, 'Constructivism: An Introduction', *E-International Relations*, 3 February 2011, available at <http://www.e-ir.info/2011/02/03/constructivism-an-introduction/>, accessed on 13 June 2016.

