

THE HINDU

“Asian perspective on global power-shifts”

Book Review by V. R. RAGHAVAN, 22 September 2009



GLOBAL POWER SHIFTS AND STRATEGIC TRANSITION IN ASIA: Edited by N.S. Sisodia, V. Krishnappa; Academic Foundation, (in association with the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi), 4772/73, 23 Bharat Ram Road (23 Anasri Road), Daryaganj, New Delhi-110002. Rs. 995.

There is a major strategic transition under way in which Asia will play a pivotal role. ‘Rise of Asia’ is a phrase that has captured the imagination of scholars and policy makers around the world. The growing output of studies and books on the implications of the power-shift to Asia has generally been based on the need to protect the interests of developed countries. Countries outside Asia, extending from Australia to the continent of Africa, have taken steps to adjust themselves to the reality of economic and security changes which the power-shift will bring in its wake. It was time for an Asian perspective to emerge on this major development. This book attempts to fill the gap by bringing together scholars from China, Japan, Europe, Russia, South Africa, and India among others to provide a unique collection of opinions on the meaning and country-specific interpretation of this significant development.

One author describes the power-shift as a transition by a conglomerate of disparate agrarian and inward-looking Asian states to a network of urbanising and industrialising countries integrating into a global and regional system. Interestingly, even as India is described as a ‘rising power’, it is seen as the weakest and the least consequential among the powers in the ordering of Asian security. India is described as likely to remain sceptical of collective security arrangements and be deferring in future to ASEAN as the principal shaper of Asian security.

Despite its growing role on the Asian scene as an important economic player, India is portrayed as unlikely to be willing to take a leadership role, and more likely to be satisfied with working its interests through multilateral and bilateral partnerships. Implicit in this assessment is the Indian imperative to avoid a conflict with any of the major neighbours. The absence of analysis by scholars from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia — areas which India reckons as Greater Southern Asia — leaves a vacuum that makes this volume less than satisfying.

China's concerns

The Chinese essay places strong emphasis on Beijing’s official assertion that the first two decades of the 21st century should be viewed as an important period of strategic opportunities.

The analysis focusses on China's critical need to sustain economic growth, develop capabilities in the security arena, and to consolidate the integrity of the Chinese state. China's concerns about its national integrity, namely on issues of Taiwan and Tibet, become apparent in this analysis. Beijing's views on the risk of nuclear proliferation in its region from North Korea and possibly even Japan are not minimised. What is not stated, but clearly implied, is an awareness of the uncertain global scene with economic future of the United States, the European Union, and Russia and an acknowledgment of Beijing's need to reassure its Asian neighbours of its peaceful intentions. The assumption that in 20 years' time China will be a global power cannot be missed in the analysis.

Japan, the strongest economic and industrial player in North Asia, comes through as being most concerned about China's military power. The oft-stated demand for greater transparency in Chinese defence expenditures and capability creation, figures pointedly. Japanese concerns on nuclear proliferation by South Korea and a strong call for greater and more effective Chinese role in the Six Party Talks is a further indicator of its security anxieties. China will continue to figure high in Japanese security considerations. Historical memories in Tokyo and Beijing provide a mutually reinforcing dynamic to his outlook. This will, in turn, reinforce Japanese reliance on U.S. guarantees and military presence in the region, which will in turn affect Beijing's outlook on its own security.

Contrast

The Russian perspective of the power-shift demonstrates its concerns on the possibility of conflicting coalitions emerging in the region, leading to a concert-of-power system. The EU impressions are pragmatic enough to accept that the EU, with its absorption with European integration and neighbourhood, cannot be a strategic actor in Asia. The interesting contrast to this is the perspective from Australia. After the assumption of the Labour-led Rudd government, Australia has moved rapidly to build trade and strategic relations with China. It had gone so far as to propose a new cooperative security architecture in the region, which was quickly and not unexpectedly, put down by the U.S.

What this book shows through its collection of essays is the continuing hold of ideas on balance of power, of military capabilities and alliance or coalition forming, even in an era of a non-polar world. The power-shift to Asia will bring more states into play with capacities to influence the international scene. They will provide the check and balance against the emergence of any one or a group of states that can drive the destinies of the rest. That is the real import of the global power-shift.