

Military In Foreign Policy

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NEW SOUTH ASIAN SECURITY: SIX CORE RELATIONS UNDERPINNING REGIONAL SECURITY

Edited by Chris Ogden

Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2016, pp. 196, ₹750.00

INDIA'S SECURITY ENVIRONMENT: PROCEEDINGS OF SELECT SEMINARS HELD BY ASIA CENTER, BANGALORE, 2007-12

Asia Center Bangalore & Konark Publishers, New Delhi, 2013, pp. 362, ₹895.00

Chris Ogden, a Senior Lecturer in Asian Security at the University of St Andrews, UK, has put together a set of six essays from experts on the ideational edifice in bilateral relations between four protagonist states in southern Asia, namely, China, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. His intent appears to be to probe the extent to which regional security environment can be managed by regional states themselves in light of the longstanding intent of withdrawal of the US led NATO from Afghanistan. Based on the contributions, he concludes that there is considerable incentive for China and India to step forward and manage regional security. The slim volume, perhaps on account of space, does not however go into how such cooperation can be brought about.

Ogden stretches the definition of South Asia by including China. This complicates his understanding that China and India can and should work together to maintain regional stability, rather than continue as interested free boarders as they have been whilst the West set about state and nation building in Afghanistan. To him, both states have a shared interest in economic growth and projection of a responsible image at the global level. This would be impacted in case of regional instability emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan. While China has longstanding ties with Pakistan and to a slightly lesser degree with Afghanistan, India has had a deepening relationship with Afghanistan over the past decade and a half. These relationships can be leveraged by the two for managing regional security. Such an effort can be under-grid by the Panchsheel principles both states signed up to over half a century back.

The chapter on India-China relations brings out how China views India's deepening relationship with the US. To China, India is participating in US's containment of China. India for its part appears to be engaged in external balancing, viewing China's actions in the Indian Ocean and its relationship with Pakistan as containment by China of India's rise in Asia and on the global stage. Simultaneously, there is also a broadening of India-China engagement ranging from economic to coordination on global issues such as climate change and WTO. It is not evident from the editor's summation how these convergences would be able to trump the disruptions over territorial claims, divergences intrinsic in a power rivalry and, further, how manipulation by the US can be transcended by the two.

David Scott's chapter on the relationship is much less buoyant. While Scott sees continuing incidence of geopolitical divides, these appear to elide Ogden, who thereby situates his belief that the West can conveniently hand over the mess it has created in Afghanistan to regional state administration. Michael Semple's chapter on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, encapsulated in its title as 'Torbor' or the all-too-familiar cousin rivalry, further complicates Ogden's thesis that a regional solution is possible.

The second set of relations—India, China, Pakistan—puts paid to Ogden's optimism. India under a majoritarian nationalist govern-

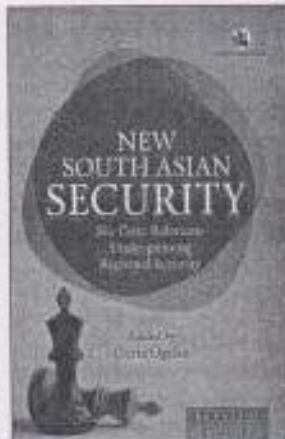
ment is unlikely to concede any space to Pakistan. For its part, Pakistan, with its India and Afghanistan policies handled by its military, cannot but see evidence of India's attempt to prevail in the region by using Afghanistan as proxy. The military there sees its quest for strategic space whittled. The mutually hostile perspectives are well covered by Runa Das in her chapter that divides the post Independence era into five phases, each with its distinct reinforcing of the self/other nationalist identity constructions in both states. To expect the Chinese to temper Pakistan, consequent to a hoped for China-India convergence on Afghanistan is wishful when the US has visibly failed in this.

Ogden refers to the SCO as a prospective body to play an expansive role in stabilizing Afghanistan. Both Pakistan and India joined the China dominated SCO only this year. Afghanistan is lined up as the next to have its observer status upgraded to full member. That there is scope for regional approaches through the SCO acquiring the dimension of an Asia wide architecture—the first such body—is useful to know. Its role can be thought through and broadened through the Heart of Asia conference series of the Istanbul process that bring together all stakeholders in the resolution. The other regional organization, the SAARC, gets scarce mention, though it was formed in the shadow of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. South Asia being the least integrated region in the world rules it out as a potential site for regional consensus—China's observer status notwithstanding—of the order required to reconcile conflicting interests.

Ogden rightly rues that any win-win form of interaction is not a straightforward eventuality owing to the nature of regional relations and the core norms of competition that underpin these. To him, the 'negative strains permeating the six bilateral relations' act as 'founts of instability' (p. 143). However, the book makes a compelling case that despite this—or rather because of this—there is need for greater regional engagement with the main issue in regional stability.

Answering 'How?' would entail getting the Taliban come in from the cold; a return to the US would not work owing to the reputational risk this posed the hyper power. Taliban's return as a moderated entity is not impossible to envisage in case its demand of a US exit is met. An Afghan led and owned peace process is fine only in its peace-making plane. Peacekeeping and peacebuilding would need to follow. The SAARC houses the world's peacekeeping prowess. South Asian militaries have cooperated in bringing peace in Africa. An SCO-SAARC regional peacekeeping initiative, under UN auspices, may provide the mechanism for a return of peace. Afghanistan can serve as catalyst for an Asian regional order.

The book makes the constructivist argument on the ideational basis for foreign policy. Conflictual relations owe to negative mindsets. It makes the case that states can move beyond this by looking at the benefits of cooperation. China's revival of the Silk Road linkages can hardly be met with an unsettled Afghanistan. Its investment of USD 45 billion in Pakistan astride the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is hardly safe in case of an unstable Pakistan. India for its part cannot become a great power if it remains Pakistan centric. It cannot access Central Asia unless Pakistan plays along. The benefits of security cooperation appear obvious enough to prompt a makeover in



adversarial thinking. Such Ogden-initiated thinking needs being furthered through creatively charting the way forward, including, as attempted here, by a South Asian peacekeeping operation to displace the US-led NATO's peace enforcement in Afghanistan.

The second volume under review comprises chapters on the proceedings of seminars at Asia Center, Bangalore at the turn of the last decade. The Asia Center provides a forum for the strategic community's Bengaluru chapter to reflect on national security. As its then chairperson, former Foreign Secretary, A.P. Venkateswaran, informs, the findings are shared with practitioners in the relevant ministries, presumably foreign and defence ministries, for informing the policy domain. However, the responsiveness of India's bureaucracy to the suggestions of policy wonks, including bodies mandated with the responsibility such as the National Security Advisory Board, is not known to be very high. Therefore, it cannot be readily conjectured that the missives from Bengaluru were as effective as they ought to have been. Hopefully, together with the endless chatter on prime time and the findings from rounds of seminars in New Delhi, the policy suggestions have made a difference.

What is certain is that these have enlivened the discussion down south on military affairs and foreign policy. They have conveyed New Delhi's preoccupations southwards, a space not particularly attuned to the sense of urgency and crisis enveloping Raisina Hill. From the summaries, it appears that the experts—most of whom were Delhi based—and former members of the military brass, steel frame and the foreign service, were more faithful to, rather than critical of, the Delhi narrative. Even if this helped integrate the south with Delhi's worldview, the underside is that Delhi has been fed back with a difference on nuance rather than on perspective. Since the years covered were of the UPA period, overlapping both its tenures, the feedback on national security was more demanding of the government to 'do more'. Perhaps, the denizens of Asia Center would be more satisfied now that a government with a different complexion is set out to 'do more' on national security.

That is hardly the message Delhi needs to hear from the strategic community's regional hubs. The lack of a chapter on internal security environment for instance belies the title of the book, *India's Security Environment*. It deals only with the external security environment, which of necessity can only be a partial treatment of India's holistic national security circumstance. In fact, excising the internal—that includes human security in which figure the mal-effects of poverty, skewed gender relations and casteist thinking—is a major deficit. The concentration on India's external security environment is at the cost of its more significant internal and human security. It is this reversal of priorities by Delhi that needs being brought home as fresh ideas from its provinces. In so far as the internal figures it is in relation to the external, such as Kashmir falls within the purview of the chapter on India-Pakistan relations and the insurgencies of the North East find passing mention in the chapter on Bangladesh. There is no discussion on the Maoist spread, including as close as northern Karnataka.

The chorus of criticism received by the UPA regime, particularly towards its end, paralysed it. Asia Center, from the thrust of its seminars, appears to have been among others driving nails into the UPA coffin. Taking a cue, the incumbent Right Wing regime, has set about concentrating on the external, while alongside drawing down on the issues that matter on long term internal security such as democratic good health based on secularism, liberalism and education. Its concentration on the external security environment makes it, firstly, oblivious to the internal, and, secondly, distracts attention from the internal. India therefore faces the prospect of ending up with participation in global power plays—covered in chapters dealing with

its relations with the US, China and Japan—without setting its internal house in order. This will seriously debilitate it, a point it can receive not from Delhi's incestuous strategic community but from India's regional power centers such as Bengaluru, Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, Pune, Chandigarh and Hyderabad.

The provincial voice can be amplified in the interaction between think tanks at these hubs. In this case the interaction has been between the Center and the Indian Council of World Affairs over some seminars jointly organized. Whereas this helps inform the attentive public in Bengaluru, this could reinforce the Delhi narrative. The Center could instead benefit also by interaction with other regional think tanks, even if some are Delhi funded such as the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies at Kolkata. For instance, if it is to focus on India's Look (now Act) East policy, it could ally with an east based think tank. A mission chapter on economics could have been built round a seminar with for instance Mumbai's Gateway House. Delhi could then receive the flavour of what energizes thinking in respective provincial capitals. For instance in the case of this volume, there is no chapter on Sri Lanka, explained away as owing to there being no seminar devoted to Sri Lanka since only interactions at Track Two were held by the Center. What the reader misses then is what the South thinks of a regional security issue closest to it. Interaction with India chapters of international think tanks of repute such as Brookings and Carnegie, is part of the way forward.

Overall, the book would be a useful acquisition for libraries and addition on student reading lists. It provides ample background to issues it covers, compressed into summaries by competent veterans. The Center has taken care to club academic experts, ambassadors with long tenures in the region or connected with themes covered and veteran soldier-scholars on the panel in its discussions. The offerings from the floor are also duly recorded and these interventions lend freshness to the discussions. The areas covered include India's relations with the US, China, Japan, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia (covered in the chapter on the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Russia, Indian Ocean rim, South East Asia and West Asia (covered under energy security). The implications of China's defence modernization also figures as an individual chapter. As the Center's director points out in the Introduction, by including chapters on India's smaller neighbours, it serves as a forerunner to India's current 'neighbourhood first' strategy. Finally, each chapter rounds off with policy advice, presumably to foreign and security policy minders, successors in chairs once held by them. The biographies of 50 speakers are included, with one repetition, and also a handy index for those challenged for time.

The book whets the appetite for more not only from Asia Center, but also from the other think tanks outside Delhi. Such accretions can cumulatively dispel decisively the gloomy, if arguably dated, picture of India's strategic culture painted by late Ambassador A.P. Venkateswaran in his Foreword.

Ali Ahmed is the author of *India's Doctrine Puzzle: Limiting War in South Asia*.

