

A Global South perspective on foreign affairs



DAMMU RAVI

The canon of international relations predominantly comprised Western assumptions and experiences until the birth of independent nations after World War II. Perspectives drawn from the experiences of previously colonised people challenged the dominant conceptions of international relations. This intensely researched book, with contributions from Professors Shibashis Chatterjee and Anindya Jyoti Majumdar, both from Jadavpur University, and Assistant Professor Sulagna Maitra from University College, Dublin, offers alternative perspectives that have taken centre-stage in the global discourse — environment, climate change, technology, gender, refugees, debt, human

security and so on. This book is a treasure and will remain invaluable for students and scholars of international relations and history.

Professor Chatterjee explains that in the current interdependent globalised world, the philosophy of realism based on sovereignty, propounded by Hans J Morgenthau, has serious limitations. He substantiates this with Kenneth Waltz's balance of power theory, validated by Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory, which posits that nations tend to seek alliances or regionalism to balance against threats rather than capabilities. Asean's pursuit of a common and collective security is a case in point. Multipolarity, represented by India, the European Union and others can be an effective tool against hegemonic tendencies. Liberalists such as Robert Keohane and Immanuel Kant argue that the involvement of international institutions and structures can widen states' perception of self-interest through economic cooperation.

Overarching globalisation is said to limit state power. At the same time, the

multipolar and multi-civilisational impact of the last two decades are transforming the state's perception of international relations. Similarly, since ethnicity and culture have cross-border influences, they tend to limit state power. Given this cultural universalism, Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilisations" is parochial and overstretched, Professor Chatterjee argues.

Anindya Jyoti Majumdar points out that the rise and fall of great powers have always been accompanied by great wars. That is because major powers have used projection of military muscle to dominate and maintain a semblance of order in the international system. Foreign policy invariably backs national interests. But today's age of technology — cyber warfare, drones and the use of AI-powered systems — puts limitations on absolute power. At the same time, we are witnessing the return of hegemonic power when major powers may no longer wish to legitimise their unilateral actions through international bodies, as Russia's attack on Ukraine and the United States'

strikes on Venezuela and Iran suggest.

Professor Majumdar also dwells on the changing notion of national security, which in the contemporary era encompasses non-traditional issues such as water, energy, environment, climate change, refugees, and so on. The United Nations has played an important role in leading the world community with collaborative global actions towards a better future with pragmatic choices, including Sustainable Development Goals. States' identity, he says, is increasingly tied into the sense of international community with its norms and codes. He agrees, however, that UN reform is imperative for tackling impending global challenges meaningfully.

Sulagna Maitra explains that global governance is multi-layered, and regionalism is a pervasive feature of international relations underpinned by interdependence, cooperation and integration. The proliferation of regional bodies in many parts of Asia, Latin America and Africa and emerging economies' groups such as Brics in the 21st century play a critical role in addressing

shared global challenges.

Professor Maitra shows how globalisation has impacted the global political economy and relations among nations. Most favoured nation-based free trade ended the era of mercantilism and protectionism that dominated the world economy for centuries. Global trade is now dominated by supply chains with focus on components and intermediaries in which the emerging economies are playing a dominant role. Investments are flowing both ways now, with leading business houses of China, South Korea, India and other developing economies also investing in the West.

However, this openness has come with high costs for the Global South in the form of a steep income divide, unemployment, environmental degradation, crony capitalism, and so on. Professor Chatterjee says capital today is not productive, but speculative, controlled and manipulated by corporate actors. British political economist Susan Strange called it "Casino Capitalism". The power of wealth



International Relations: Concepts and Trends

by Shibashis Chatterjee, Anindya Jyoti Majumdar & Sulagna Maitra
Published by Orient BlackSwan
568 pages ₹875

of multinationals exerts enormous influence on the state.

Professor Chatterjee also elaborates on the impact of globalisation on the Indian state, especially in its leading cities, where liberal Western consumerism and cosmopolitan culture, media and entertainment often clash with tradition. However, in South Asia, the basic framework, he says, has not altered; territorial reality, sovereignty, national security, survival, ethnicity, and resources-sharing continue to dominate the politics of the subcontinent. India's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era is said to have become distinctly realist as both the United Progressive Alliance

and the National Democratic Alliance governments sought to transform India into a major power in world politics. Such a projection hinges on the country's economic capability as well as its ability to negotiate, both a vociferous domestic polity and a complex neighbourhood.

The reviewer is a former Indian Foreign Service officer. dammuravi@gmail.com