

## BOOK REVIEW

***Asia and Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: New Anxieties, New Opportunities.* Edited by Rahul Mishra, Azirah Hashim and Anthony Milner. London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2021. Hardcover: 218pp.**

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As a participant of the Asia-Europe Conference 2019 that took place at the Asia-Europe Institute, Kuala Lumpur, this reviewer can gladly attest to the authors' description that the book is a "systematic and definitive presentation" of the deliberations during the conference. In that sense, one must appreciate the proficiency of editors Rahul Mishra, Azirah Hashim, and Anthony Milner at capturing a diverse range of topics, perspectives, and arguments and presenting them in a manner that keeps the reader engaged.

The chapters in this book are compartmentalized into four main sections reflecting four instructive themes. From a scholarly point of view, these sections don't necessarily have to be read in order, making the book a good reference material. The editors have pulled out all the stops in bringing together the views of the best minds in the field and this makes for a valuable addition to the existing body of work on critical issues in International Relations (IR).

The first part of the book, which is on western and non-western approaches to international relations is an important preface to the rest of the sections. Chapters by Amitav Acharya, Jawhar Hassan and Makio Miyagawa provide context to the following discussions on the "anxieties" of Europe and Asia and the emerging international order.

Acharya, in defining the contemporary global order, discerns how the world today is different from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in terms of actors. He explains that actors that control the global network of information and technology must be accounted for, hence moving away from the older approaches of relying exclusively on traditional parameters. A proponent of Global IR, Acharya also briefly captures the various developments in the expansion of international relations as a field of study i.e., a growing focus on propagating non-western IR thinking and theory.

Hassan's chapter was an excellent read, especially to a Southeast Asian that understands the extent of the "western hold" on non-western mindsets. His emphasis on the importance of a "universal approach" to IR and breaking free from the dominant western approach resonates with the reviewer who works on non-western IR. Hassan's detailed account of ASEAN's organising concept of comprehensive security was a good recap that framed the chapter well. The same can be said about Miyagawa's chapter, though, the reader was left with more questions than insights at the end of it.

Parts Two and Three are a mixed bag and some chapters appealed more to the reviewer than the rest. Some of the more technical chapters that highlighted and attempted to explain the

various agencies and mechanisms within the EU and ASEAN somewhat diluted overarching arguments on the so-called unique “threats” to these regional blocs.

In fact, Enrico Letta’s detailed account of EU and ASEAN’s approaches to cyber security neither fully recognises nor appreciates how despite similar goals, organisational structure and functional specialisation to deal with such threats make ASEAN and the EU such different organisations. ASEAN, despite being resource-strapped for the past decade or so, continues to develop agencies on top of several other agencies and has been criticised more, of late, for being a bloated bureaucracy. These stark differences between the EU and ASEAN are captured well in the following chapter by Southeast Asian history stalwart, Farish Noor. The editors must be appreciated for arranging these two chapters in tandem because while Letta stresses that EU and ASEAN must work together because of certain manufactured similarities, Noor underlines that EU and ASEAN can learn and share from one another because of stark differences in dispositions. Sven Biscop’s chapter which concluded Part Two is a nuanced and succinct overview of the EU’s strategic choices for the 2020s. The most important takeaway is that the EU must be cautious of the emergence of competing “blocs” within the Union itself, fuelled by varied stances towards the US and China. Biscop’s analysis of the individual interests of EU member states and how these differences could render the EU’s effective global role challenging, is insightful.

The highlight of Part Three, in this reviewer’s opinion, is undoubtedly Sana Hashmi’s chapter on China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Hashmi adeptly captures the significance and challenges of the SCO with an emphasis on China’s own anxieties vis-à-vis Central Asian states, Russia and formidable neighbour, India. Hashmi’s chapter is a good change in rhythm to accent the developments and anxieties of other parts of Asia. While Hashmi is quite exhaustive in her assessment of China and Russia in the SCO, the issue of how backyard neighbours, India and Pakistan’s membership in SCO would affect China’s posture within the mechanism, is touched upon only briefly.

The final part of the book, “Emerging constructs: The Indo-Pacific” is a fitting conclusion and it does seem like the editors saved the best part for last. In Part Four’s first chapter, S.D. Muni and the book’s editor, Rahul Mishra pick up from where they left off in their last book, *India’s Eastward Engagement: From Antiquity to Act East Policy* and describe the Indo-Pacific as a geo-strategic and geo-political construct emerging to serve specific purposes.

The authors highlight how the Indo-Pacific strategy evolved in Indian foreign policy and thereafter briefly describe the various definitions and propositions of the Indo-Pacific by the United States, Japan, Australia, ASEAN, India and the European powers. The authors further argue that the future trajectory of the Indo-Pacific is widely dependent on China’s behaviour and its approach towards Asian countries. The authors also substantiate, by mentioning that China’s relations with Pakistan may further incentivise India’s shift closer to US and its allies. As someone who works on South Asia’s foreign policy and regional dynamics, the reviewer largely agrees with the authors but also then questions the relevance of India’s neighbourhood policy amidst these developments.

This chapter is important because it finally elucidates India’s approach to a relatively new “anxiety and opportunity”. In fact, one could say that if it wasn’t for this chapter, a major drawback of the book’s (and conference’s) discourse is that it does/did not sufficiently highlight India and South Asia’s trajectory and challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, save a few mentions here and there. India has shown great resolve in the past decade to take a more proactive role in the region and this must be acknowledged better in future Asian discourse.

Paul Gillespie's chapter which covers Europe and the Indo-Pacific concept is also a highlight of Part Four. He begins with a chronological account of the EU's engagement with Asia since the 1990s and goes on to explore how deeper EU-ASEAN cooperation in the Indo-Pacific could help mitigate great power rivalry in the current geopolitical landscape. Gillespie's chapter is important because it assesses the value of enhanced inter-regional ties and the importance of ASEAN to the EU and vice-versa, now more than ever.

*Asia and Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: New Anxieties, New Opportunities* is an engaging and relevant piece of work in this day and age. The editors have been perceptive with the curation of chapters and have ensured that it captures "both sides of the coin". Unfortunately, the book was published months before major geopolitical events such as the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the Russia-Ukraine crisis have taken place. These events, however, do attest to the book's main theme and argument that Asia and Europe will be faced with very real and very current, anxieties. Hopefully, these come with opportunities too.

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