

## Book Review

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R. Wang, C. ZHU (eds.), *Annual Report on the Development of International Relations in the Indian Ocean Region (2014)*. Berlin, Springer-Verlag, 2015, 343 pp., US\$129.00, ISBN 978-3-662-45939-3

*Annual Report on the Development of International Relations in the Indian Ocean Region (2014)* is a yearly report prepared by Chinese scholars of repute, to present an exclusively Chinese perspective on the evolving geopolitical, geostrategic and geoeconomic situation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The authors distinctly use an economic approach to analyse the political and strategic developments in the region, and back their arguments with a substantial amount of statistical data.

The report is designed in the form of an inverted pyramid, beginning with a general overview of the strategic situation in the world, in Asia and in the IOR. The analysis then delves deep into the evolving patterns of multilateral relations and regional economic/strategic co-operative mechanisms in South Asia and the IOR, and finally narrows down to bilateral relations between major players of the region – both resident and foreign.

A broad Chinese worldview, which is right at the heart of this book and which reverberates through each one of its chapters, has been nicely summed up right at the beginning of the book as “one main line, two main trends, and three centres” (p. v). To

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elucidate the Chinese hypothesis further, there is one main line of contemporary international relations – that is, the contest between the unipolar and multipolar worlds. The scholars observe that there are two dominant geopolitical trends at present – the first one is of peaceful development and mutually beneficial cooperation, perpetuated by globalisation-induced interdependency and common global challenges, and the second trend is that of Cold War mentality, opposition, conflict and resentment, perpetuated by an “inertia of thoughts” (p. viii) and vested interests. The three centres of the world, as the Chinese scholars noted, are the centres of global financial crisis (i.e. largely the US and the EU); the centres of confrontation, chaos and conflict that are the Middle East and North Africa regions; and the centre of global economic growth, which is in Asia, particularly in East Asia.

Talking about the relevance of South Asia and the IOR in contemporary world politics, the Chinese scholars observe that there has been a worldwide prediction of the region emerging as the new strategic epicentre for 21st-century geopolitics (being the frontal zone for global anti-terrorism activities and given the rising importance of the sea lines of communication or SLOCs over the Indian Ocean). However, the rise of the region is not guaranteed as there remain certain structural problems – the regional power structure is unbalanced, there is a lack of integrity among the nations and serious internal security issues in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan add on to the high risk factor.

They further noted that several extraterritorial players including China may have lately intensified their contact with the region, but this is certainly not the core of their global strategy. A real-time competition or contest between these extraterritorial powers for exerting influence on this region is somewhat overrated. For example, the US, they say, has a policy based on cost consideration and risk avoidance, and thus is unlikely to get into any serious contestation with other powers for building influence in the region. On the other hand, they rule out the possibility that the competition between Japan and China may spread beyond the Western Pacific and reach the shores of the Indian Ocean. For China too, they say, South Asia and the IOR is not the primary strategic area, although it has some “strategic values” (p. 37) for China. However, China does not want the “secondary” (p. 39) strategic challenges emerging out of this region to become its primary concern in coming years, so it strives to maintain a geopolitical balance in the subcontinent and intends to prevent further weakening of Pakistan’s position vis-à-vis India.

Within the South Asia and the IOR, the Chinese scholars predict that the Bay of Bengal region has the potential to assume more strategic significance in a longer time frame. They argue that one of the most important aspects of the United States Rebalancing to Asia Pacific strategy is actually about the power balancing between the United States, China and India, and that in the coming years this power play amongst the three regional powers will pan out more in the Bay of Bengal region than in any other part of the world, including the Western Pacific. As a result, the region will witness tough competition, and innovative cooperation mechanisms may be observed amongst these three powers.

Considering the Bay of Bengal region to be the potential theatre of the US–China–India power play in the coming days, much of the analysis of the book hinges upon the political, economic and military situation in Myanmar, the country which the Chinese scholars consider as the focal point of China’s Indian Ocean strategy. Therefore, political reforms in Myanmar, its democratic transition and its evolving relationship with foreign powers like the US, India and Japan have been studied in great detail in this book. Different facets of the China–Myanmar relationship – its historical legacy, its post-2002 robust geoeconomic expansion, the neo-colonialist accusations labelled against Chinese investments thereof, the US\$ 3.6 billion Myitsone dam controversy in 2011, the changed public opinion in Myanmar towards China in the following years, the rising competition in Myanmar’s economic space from other key players including India, the future course of China–Myanmar relations – all these topics have been explored extensively in the book, in more than one chapter.

The book also deals extensively with the “strategic space overlap” (p. 193) between China and India in the IOR. According to the Chinese scholars, the Sino–Indian relationship which is marked by the coexistence of “four Cs” (p. 192) (that is, cooperation, competition, conflict and coordination) is the most important bilateral relationship in the IOR. In recent years, mutual interest and dependence between the two neighbours have been on the rise, but competition and differences on key issues continue to intensify as well. In addition to the land boundary problems left over from history and the issue of trade deficit, rivalry in the IOR and competition over controlling rights on regional cooperation are increasingly becoming a defining feature of Sino–India bilateral ties, especially after the commencement of India’s Look East and China’s Go West policy. In such a situation, the Chinese scholars recommend that a possible breakthrough lies not in occupying each other’s strategic space,

but in admitting the facts and trends of strategic spatial overlap, and taking rational and positive measures to deal with it.

While examining the evolving dynamics of the Sino–Indian relationship, the scholars rightly capture India’s biggest dilemma in the IOR – that is, the temptation of balancing China’s influence in its backyard with the assistance from the United States, while on the other hand, being absolutely unwilling to play as “a chess piece” (p. 197) in the United States’ strategic game. Similarly, China’s dilemma with Pakistan also becomes apparent in successive chapters. China does not want to disturb its arrangement with Pakistan as the “primary cooperation partner” (p. 39) in South Asia. It intends to continue strengthening its support to Pakistan, preventing it from lagging behind further, thereby preventing an unbalanced power balance in the South Asian region. However, the domestic security situation in Pakistan, its acute energy shortage, the unbalanced trade and investment between China and Pakistan, and its practice of foreign exchange control keeps hurting the Chinese interest and adds on to China’s disillusionment.

To sum up, this is a comprehensive report which not only records the chronology of events of geopolitical significance in the IOR in the year 2013, but also provides original scholarly arguments and interpretations, substantiated by a large set of statistical facts and figures, data and analyses. If the reader doesn’t mind experimenting a bit with different nuances of the English language, this is a great book for understanding the Chinese worldview and apprehending their outlook as well as their strategy for South Asia and the IOR.