

Book Review

Is China Encircling India?

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This latest book of Mohd Aminul Karim concerns a subject on which he is a recognized expert. The soldier-scholar has lived and studied in China, has researched and taught on China, and has written extensively on security issues involving China. Here, we also have India, the other Asian behemoth, and the rivalry between the two giants is not limited to their aspiration to regional dominance only, they also have an active conflict involving unresolved border dispute. In this book, Aminul Karim has sought to analyze the recent Chinese advances in the Indian Ocean and their ramifications for India and the greater region.

The book has been organized in 14 chapters. The first three chapters deal with introduction and theoretical issues. The operational chapters start with geopolitical and geo-economic profiles of India and China, and then go on to explain the strategic goal of China, how China might encircle India, Chinese Naval strategy, the land boundary dispute between the two countries and their drive for military modernization, reactions of India's allies, the various regional projects such as BRI, Indo Pacific and the quad, and finally the author's reflections and possible scenario developments. A good number of maps and illustrations have enriched the book in as much as these help visualize the ground situation.

Comparing the geopolitical and geo-economic profiles of China and India, Aminul Karim points out the persistent enlargement of the gap in economic growth between the two countries and rightly opines that funding India's quest to match the Chinese military modernization may be problematic since India has an economy about one fifth the size of China. He also recalls the Soviet disaster in trying to compete with the USA with a much smaller economic base. India's advantage lie in its youthful population compared to China's aging, and her possible alliances with the USA and other regional powers that are wary of the Chinese hegemony, like Japan and Australia in the Indo-Pacific theatre. Karim has also pointed to the difficulties of India's federal parliamentary system vis a vis China's centralized one party rule. His hunch that India may think of a Presidential system, however, seems a bit far-fetched.

The stated purpose of the BRI is to develop infrastructure in order to improve connectivity that would facilitate trade in the region and beyond. However, as has been rightly pointed out, all roads in the BRI construct lead to Beijing, and that is only natural when the prime mover in China. The objective, the author says, is to build a Sino-centric regional order. As for the 'String of Pearls', China has built ports (and sometimes airports), in Djibouti where they also have a military base,

in Gwadar, Hambantota and perhaps most importantly in Kyaukphyu in Myanmar. The last one will largely relieve China of its potentially dangerous dependence on the Malacca strait. The author mentions that India's is trying to counterbalance China by her Act East Policy. This, however, compares very poorly with the BRI. Karim believes that by invigorating the US led IPS and the quad, India could counterbalance the BRI. While the Quad may have military implications, the BRI is too diverse to transform into a 'military bastion' as feared by India. Prime Minister Modi has called the Quad an important pillar of stability in the Indo pacific region. Karim feels that India's longstanding strategic ambiguity has thus been compromised in favour of confronting China geopolitically with active support of the US and Japan.

The fifth chapter of the book, China's Historical Military Posture, has an interesting observation. The Chinese military stance has been characterized as 'non-expansionist and averse to territorial conquest'. This view is held by many other notables and the author has also quoted them. This assumption, however, rests on very flimsy ground. Historically China had always been an empire, not a nation state, and empires are by definition results of expansion. The results of expansion are visible even today. If we look at the map of the great wall that was built to defend China against invaders from the north, the 'core China' is what is on the south and east of the wall. Those on the north and west, Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Xin Ziang are all results of imperial expansion. These entities were more often independent of China. The current dispensation in China has only tightened their stranglehold on these territories, gradually doing away with the large measure of autonomy they traditionally enjoyed even when they were not fully independent. Kissinger's contention that the 'territorial claims of Chinese empire stopped at the water's edge' is true. But there are practical reasons why the Song Dynasty (960-1279) did not pursue a maritime empire. The economic reasons for which European powers pursued maritime colonial empires in the 16th 17th centuries, did not exist in 12th century China. The 21st century empire building has a completely different form, and the Chinese are doing that with remarkable success in most of Africa and parts of Asia.

Is China, then, encircling India? Yes, China has created the string of pearls, building Chinese maritime outposts around India. However, they do not really constitute a siege that can bring down the 'Indian fortress'. The Indian Ocean is India's home turf and she can devote her entire capacity in this theatre. For China, on the contrary, the Pacific is and will remain of pivotal importance. Besides, in a conflict situation, China may not have the freedom to use these outposts as bases of military operation except for Gwadar in Pakistan. China is heavily investing in strengthening the blue water capabilities of its Navy. However, the prime concern of China in the Indian Ocean will still be the safety and security of the Sea Lanes of Communication in which other powers will also have vested interest. The Chinese outposts could have utility in advancing that security.

Aminul Karim rightly thinks that China's race for dominance will continue unabated. He also believes that in spite of that, a kind of Asian peace 'should prevail'. No one will contest this idea, but whether it 'will prevail' will depend to a large extent on the behavior of the protagonists. Xi Chin Ping, unlike his predecessors, seems to be a man in a hurry. He has changed the prevailing culture of the Chinese Communist Party that has existed since the time of Deng and has thereby eliminated the mechanism of regular and predictable change. He would like to confirm his place in history by bringing Taiwan back to China, by force if necessary. Any reckless move by any player could upset the delicate peace prevailing in the region.

The book is a must read for scholars and researchers on China. Universities and research organizations should procure copies of the book for use by their members. Nova Science books are priced at the higher side making it difficult for general readers to purchase. However, the book will also be a useful read for the general readers who have interest in the phenomenon called China.

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