

Book Review: Drifts and Dynamics: Russia's Ukraine War and Northeast Asia

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Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, scholars across the world have focused on the consequences that this war has had on Ukraine, the global economy, and Europe in particular. The focus has also moved towards how the West has responded to the developments in Ukraine. In India too, there has also been an ongoing debate about the developments in Ukraine and how the government here should respond to it.

However, the mainstream narrative often misses the developments that are happening in Northeast Asia, this book aims at shedding light on this. The book has been written as a collective effort of Professor Sriparna Pathak, Professor Manoj Panigrahi, Divyanshu Jindal, Palak Maheshwari, Ashu Mann, Ashutosh Kumar, Nishant Sharma and Sukanya Bali, highlights how Northeast Asia is responding to the development of Russia invading Ukraine and how the response of each of the actors in the region is unique.

This book highlights that the respective national interests of each of these countries play a critical role in the change in foreign policy and differences in their respective responses. For instance, North Korea is one of the five countries which has openly supported Russia and its actions against Ukraine since the start of the war, while on the other hand, Japan has taken a very proactive and aggressive stance against Russia by imposing sanctions on Russia. While the People's Republic of China has shown more covert support towards Russia, we also see South Korea deviating from its usual foreign policy approach by banning exports to Russia. This book also addresses the larger parallels and comparisons drawn between Russia invading Ukraine and China invading Taiwan, and the feasibility of the same. It also addresses 'cyber warfare' as a new front of conflict, which has become a distinctive feature of the Russia - Ukraine war. The book also talks about the new access form between China and Russia and why it can be argued that we are now witnessing a 'Cold War 2.0'.

The first chapter addresses the question of the extent of cooperation and collusion between China and Russia in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, which becomes an important question to understand their larger motive to challenge and change the existing international order. The first chapter also argues that China's response to the development of the Russia-Ukraine war consists of certain aspects of it which are in line with the goals of the cooperation it started with Russia exactly twenty days before the war started, while the other aspects are vague in nature. On one hand, China is taking a neutral stance in international institutions like the United Nations, on the other, it is actively promoting propaganda in the domestic media space which supports Russia's actions. China is also maintaining its relations with Ukraine despite these actions in favour of Russia, by sending medical and humanitarian supplies.

The second chapter talks about the comparisons drawn between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the possible replication of China in the Taiwan Strait to invade Taiwan. The chapter argues that due to the war dragging on, the Taiwanese side is more assured of the fact that China might be reluctant to follow in Russia's footsteps. The author uses the concept of "push and pull" and

argues that China has more to lose than to gain if they unleash their force on Taiwan like what Russia has inflicted on Ukraine.

The third chapter reflects on how the Russia-Ukraine war is providing a glimpse of how future warfare would look like with the advent of cyber warfare and kinetic wars. The chapter also argues that due to an increasing dependency on the use of cyber-warfare, countries in Northeast Asia are increasingly becoming vulnerable to cyber-attacks from the enemy camp, for instance Japan faces cyber threats from Russia, North Korea, and China, who are also persistently working towards developing their respective cyber capabilities. The chapter focuses on the same concerning each country of the region.

The fourth chapter discusses South Korean responses to the developments of the Russia-Ukraine war. It argues that it is underlined by the nation's commitments and considerations on two fronts, first its longstanding conflict with North Korea and second, its critical military alliance with the USA. This chapter also indicates a difference in South Korea's approach towards Russia when it invaded Crimea in 2014, as opposed to its response in 2022. In 2014 they abstained from US-led sanctions and maintained economic ties with Russia. However, in 2022, the South Korean government-imposed sanctions and banned exports to Russia. The chapter argues that South Korea's response is an indicator of maturing South Korean 'middle power diplomacy' along with its status as an ally of the US, and its desire to support the inviolability of territorial sovereignty while facing the regional threat in the North itself.

The fifth chapter investigates the possibility of denuclearisation of North Korea after the start of the Russia-Ukraine war and argues how it will become more difficult to ensure the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as the Korean leadership will use the invasion of Ukraine as another reason for its need to have nuclear weapons.

The sixth chapter analyses Japanese responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This chapter argues that Japan has taken some tough policy decisions such as sanctioning Russia, despite prominent Japanese investments and interests in Sakhalin gas projects. Japan too has changed its foreign policy discourse vis-à-vis Russia. The current Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and the public of Japan have reacted boldly to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and have supported the cause of Ukraine very strongly by providing extensive humanitarian aid and have condemned Russia in multilateral platforms and forums. This chapter also argues that Japan's reaction to this war changed the political narrative in the Japanese political sphere and public perception, leading to Japan wanting to become a "normal state."

The seventh chapter focuses on cyberwarfare and the various disinformation campaigns by both Russia and China by analysing news reports and social media content posted by state-affiliated media in both countries, to understand and analyse the intent and the impact of these projects. It also tries to understand China's support to Russia in the conflict, along with the underlying motivations behind the complicity in the conflict. The chapter argues that disinformation campaigns and cyber-warfare are used hand in hand to legitimise Russian actions on the ground and limit Ukraine's on-ground capacity.

The last chapter throws light on the Russia-China axis along with a possibility of the start of a 'Cold War 2.0'. It argues that in the 'Cold War 2.0', China's growth may pose a looming threat in the 21st century with the fear of new poles of power getting redefined. By reflecting on the relations that China has with both Russia and Ukraine, while covertly supporting Russia and

the larger complexity of the Chinese approach in general makes this scenario complicated to grasp in its entirety.

Overall, the book is quite informative and throws holistic light on not only how each of the countries of the region are responding to the developments of the Russia-Ukraine war but also shows the higher complexity of geopolitics that Northeast Asia is plagued with. It is a highly recommended read for anyone who is trying to understand the region and why they are responding in a particular way towards the Russia-Ukraine war. With current tensions in the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula, this book provides a solid base to understand the current developing geopolitical undercurrents. The arguments are also written in a lucid manner, which makes it easier for the reader to understand the complex dynamics of Northeast Asia. Now, one would also possibly think of the prospects of research in this area. As a reader and a researcher of Northeast Asia, one must be discerning enough to understand that the Russia–Ukraine war is not the only concerning factor which has impacted and is impacting the geopolitics of the region. It has shifted the direction of the narrative in the most abrupt manner, but as things stand in Northeast Asia now, the Russia–Ukraine war has now slowly taken a back seat.

One of the aspects of research is how dynamics develop and how much of an impact this war has really had on the dynamics of the countries in the region with time. Another related aspect would be how these countries are going to respond to other such challenges in the future. As we are seeing in Japan now, is the Russia–Ukraine war really the only key trigger for Japanese policy makers to aggressively focus on enhancing their defence capabilities? What are the other underlying currents? Is it a pragmatic move to do so?

The situation in the Korean Peninsula and the increasing engagement with Russia and activities of North Korea is another such question. This not only triggers the debate of denuclearisation but also makes one wonder whether North Korea is going to use this situation as a bargaining chip to garner a bigger role and relevance in the regional dynamics – while trying to recover its economy by selling weapons to Russia. For South Korea, are we now going to witness the tilt towards the US for ensuring their security at the cost of China, and if not, how is it still going to play the game of balance in this increasingly difficult geopolitical dynamic, is another important aspect that needs to be further investigated.

One aspect which the reviewer felt needed more attention in the book is a future research prospect on the role of energy resources, security and trade with both Russia and Ukraine for the countries of the region. How much has it impacted their response to the events that have unfolded and will unfold in the future? Can the prospects of energy security and economic trade really be enough to stop any prospects of war or a clash in this region now?

Finally, with regards to futuristic ways of warfare, how much influence is cyber-warfare really going to take, especially in the region and whether conventional warfare will be supplemented with it, or will it become an autonomous and different front altogether? What other aspect of warfare and strategy can take up prominent space, especially in the case of Northeast Asian nations? How prominent really is the Russia – China axis in larger global geopolitics? Is it strategic or just tactical in nature? Are the scholars overestimating it or underestimating it? If one starts to sit and really think, there are endless questions that can come to one's mind, and at the end of the day, time has the ultimate power to show us the manifestation of dynamics of the narrative in our realities. We can just wait and watch, instead of making definite predictions.

References

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