

Chinese Regionalism in Asia: Beyond the Belt and Road Initiative

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Napoleon cautioned the world about China's reawakening from a state of deep slumber to reclaim the world. For a century, China remained isolated and weakened as a nation. In due course, the whole world witnessed the astonishing rise of China from a panda to a dragon; from a struggling economy to an economic powerhouse, and from an isolated nation to an agenda-setter in global politics. The book 'Chinese Regionalism in Asia: Beyond the Belt and Road Initiative,' co-edited by Tiang Boon Hoo and Jared Morgan Mckinney, delves into some of the most vigorous debates surrounding Asian regionalism and China's burgeoning role in influencing the future Asian regional order. Hoo and Mckinney have tried to capture all the relevant themes underpinning the broader Asian regionalism and China's evolving role vis-à-vis its mission of reshaping the future Asian strategic order.

The book is a compilation of nine chapters delineating cross-cutting themes of China's approaches to Asian regionalism, its schemes of regional integration in Asia, and the overriding objectives that it strives to achieve via these regionalist mechanisms. It can be considered an indispensable contribution to the literature regarding China's role and influence concerning remolding Asian regionalism. The authors dissect China's contemporary regionalism in Asia holistically.

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According to them, China's regionalism in Asia goes beyond the vision and implementation of China's BRI. While the BRI is a crucial facet of China's regionalism in Asia, that does not imply that China's regionalism initiatives and agendas are exclusively limited to the BRI alone. In other words, the BRI is only one of the several grand initiatives undertaken by China aimed at reshaping the coming Asian regional order. This is distinctive since most of China's recent efforts aimed at Asian regionalism are conveniently downsized to mere BRI. On the contrary, the contributors argue that the full spectrum of China's regionalism is much more than just the BRI. It is an amalgamation of complementary regional mechanisms such as the RCEP, AIIB, CICA, LMC, and the SCO.

The authors explore China's choices in a world where US hegemony is faltering and the world is witnessing a retrenchment of globalisation. The grim reality of the world we live in today is arrested by retreating globalisation and the consequent rise of populism (mostly far-right politics) and the return of great-power politics as epitomised by the ensuing strategic rivalry between China and the United States. To confront these trends, the authors argue that our responses have been essentially three-fold. First, there is still a glimmer of hope for the liberal international order to indirectly pave the way for re-globalisation as economic interdependence deepens further. Secondly, there has been a rise in nationalism as nations seek to reinforce their national sovereignty and preserve their national interests. Third, there has been a revival of regionalism on the global stage and globalisation has been reduced to regionalism, a subset of globalisation.

While the authors suggest that China as it transitions into a fully developed economy by 2049, should resort to regionalism and not nationalism. Such concepts undermine an important aspect of the domestic politics of China related to the consolidation of political control by the executive, President Xi Jinping, and his party. It is fueling nationalism inside China to support its grand strategy of

Asma Siddiq

development outside the country. This dynamic has been particularly manifested in Xi's era which calls for 'strive for achievement' or the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.' All these notions, in addition to underpinning China's pro-active approach to international affairs, also imply the harnessing of the power of nationalism to achieve China's ambitious international agendas.

In a similar vein, China has been upgrading the CICA as a credible regional platform for managing regional security issues. The most significant aspect of CICA has been the concept of "Asian security," floated by China to formulate the contours of regional security in Asia. According to this notion, regional security is foremost the duty and responsibility of the Asian people and therefore they have to uphold it. This is in line with the argument that China's regional designs are aimed at harnessing its global outreach as it has tied regional security directly with global security. Hence, this signifies China's move from "regionalism to continentalism." In addition, China has also been amassing support for cooperation in the non-traditional security (NTS) domain which is gaining appreciation in policy circles. The Lancang Mekong initiative is illustrative of this dynamic.

Finally, Zhongying delves into the exploration of the future face of the Indo-Pacific in terms of cooperation and integration, to which he suggests that actors should pursue inclusive rather than exclusive regionalism. This seems to stay as a mere suggestion as trends are indicative of intensifying divergences in the Indo-Pacific region with Washington reviving QUAD and operationalising its Indo-pacific strategy. This is aimed at the containment of China. On the other hand, although it appears to be pursuing inclusive regionalism, it is inclined towards exclusive regionalism by keeping the US out of its ambitious regional schemes such as the SCO. Overall, this book is a valuable resource for anyone interested in building a deeper analysis of China's strategic orientation vis-à-vis Asian regionalism. ■