A Sensible Tale of Three Powers

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In 2005, Robert Zoellick, then a senior official at the United States (US) Department of State, publicly called upon China to become a “responsible stakeholder.” This famous exhortation was made at the near zenith of US power in the post-Cold War era. The blowback from Iraq and Afghanistan had not become fully apparent. Neither had the boom in the global economy shown any signs of dissipating. In short, America could imagine a world where the socialisation of rising powers of Asia into a system would be little more than rearranging the furniture around.

In her previous avatar, Anja Manuel served at the Department of State during those heady years (2005–07) and the liberal world order ideas espoused by Zoellick must have resonated with her. For her thesis is precisely this: China and India, despite their political contrasts and power differentials, should be seen more as contributors to the global order and less as chess pieces where one or both are employed in a strategy to manage the power shifts underway. Manuel rejects the idea that the “international system cannot shift peacefully to accommodate new large powers” (p 8). She instead is of the opinion that “we must stop our hand-wringing about China and seek instead to forge harmonious relationships with both giants” (p 3), and “we must coax each giant, through patient interaction and cooperation, to accept a responsible international role” (p 9).

Manuel succinctly narrates how Indian and Chinese leaders think about their past and the lessons they drew from the oppressive period of Western domination over Asia. India, despite a degrading and economically emasculating colonial experience, found an unusual peace with its traumatic past, unlike China which drew more abiding lessons and acquired a prickly identity along with a deep resolve to restore its historical primacy. Much of the book then dwells on the unplanned or enforced transformations that India and China undertook as they re-oriented their economies by greater engagement abroad and opening up at home. The balance sheet of accomplishments and tribulations in this journey are conveyed through empathetic anecdotes and catchy statistics. By emphasising the enormous domestic challenges—inequality, corruption, demographic shifts, ecological degradation, and political instability—that are now part of the Indian and Chinese pathways to great power status, Manuel is also perhaps telling American readers how different Asia’s rising powers are from its predecessors who had the luxury of going global after solving domestic problems.

Yet, going global they are. India’s aid grants to other countries are already the same as China’s, despite a much smaller economy. China is already the second-largest global investor after the US. Manuel is particularly impressed with the institution-building by the rising powers in recent years. In contrast, “our economic, political, and security institutions are stuck in the past. We haven’t yet found a way to modernise global governance or to integrate China, India, and other rising powers effectively into the system” (p 232). The BRICS (an association of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) are, thus, legitimate reactions to stasis in the ancien régime. They are “warning shots: unless we reshape outdated postwar institutions, India and China will ignore or leave them” (p 241).
The book is a smartly structured and sensitively argued narrative. The intended audience is the Western, particularly the American reader who has been given an overdose of China’s rise and almost nothing of India’s more modest but still important story. By introducing India to such an audience without resorting to the clichéd “free India versus repressive China” thesis is refreshing.

**Partners in the World Order**

India has been presented—warts and all—without crudely juxtaposing a rival “other.” Manuel does not fawn over India’s democracy; nor is she aghast with China’s authoritarian system. Each serves a purpose in her world image, and both are opportunities for American multinational companies, some of whom the author’s consulting firm also advises. While India is presented as the “like-minded” and friendlier of the two, China’s vital importance for the US is evident throughout this book. Furthermore, Manuel adds, “(a)s India expands its global role, we may have more disagreements” (p 276).

It is important to discern these arguments sensibly. That India is being increasingly seen as a potential player in a changing Asia will ring positively to Indian ears. Yet, this is not a clarion call for a balance of power approach—to rope India into an anti-China camp—that many in Delhi seem to relish, often without forethought of what such a role would entail and its implications for India’s values, identity, and interests. Manuel is convinced that such a “strategy alone will not succeed, just as it did not succeed for Britain” who lost its great power status in devastating world wars with a rising Germany (pp 273–74).

When situated with the contemporary political winds in the US, the idea of an early Sino–American modus vivendi appears unlikely. Not only do US policymakers appear determined to secure the competitiveness of American multinational companies, but they are also now equally obliged to negotiate trade agreements that bring real economic advantages to middle and working class America. So, while it might appear overtaken by rapidly unfolding events and the upending by the Trump administration of any meaningful quest to socialise or collaborate with rising powers to manage the international order, This Brave New World nevertheless offers a compelling alternative to a US grand strategy driven by narrow power politics and coercion. Yet, having seen the real face of the American power and the whimsical nature of its foreign policy (not for the first time, one hastens to add), would the rest of the world embrace a softer version of US foreign policy, post-Trump, without a substantive say in the global governance system? It is unlikely. Still, Manuel leaves the reader with an appealing and ambitious image of how a dominant power can shape the rise of the rest without resorting to an ultimately self-defeating foreign policy vision.

Manuel comes down firmly in the camp of the liberal grand strategists, who advocate an accommodative posture with Asia’s rising powers in pursuit of a bigger prize: an open world economy and a non-violent transition to a new world order.

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**Reference**