

## Book Review

---

### *Maritime Security Complexes of the Indo-Pacific Region*

---

Ankit Tiwari

The book '*Maritime Security Complexes of the Indo-Pacific Region*', written by **Dr Vijay Sakhuja and Dr W. Lawrence S. Prabhakar**, is an important and timely contribution that provides a comprehensive net assessment of the region's security dynamics and challenges, using the theoretical framework of the 'maritime variant' of the Regional Security Complex (RSC) Theory.

The Maritime Security of the Indo-Pacific Region has become an important area of focus for multilateral organizations, great powers, and emerging as well as existing regional and extra-regional alliances. This is apparent in the formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and other mini-laterals. The region is confronted by a milieu of traditional and non-traditional security challenges, and the line separating the two is increasingly blurred as spill-overs from each domain further complicate the combined threat matrix of the region for various stakeholders. Further, as the book points out, the security environment of the region is threatened, in no small measure, by rising great-power contestations (and militarization) in the Western Pacific Ocean. Both, the US and China have significant military capabilities (nuclear and conventional), and the ever-present threat of escalation is driving (and will continue to drive) many of the security-based engagements by various stakeholders. However, various sub-regions in the Indo-Pacific play host to an entire range of challenges like climate change, terrorism, piracy, narcotics trade, small arms proliferation, and even illegal fishing, that are separate from this binary, and the lens of the RSC theory is particularly helpful in bringing out their salient characteristics without the consistent and sometimes unnecessary distraction of great-power rivalry. This also allows the authors to generate insights into the intra-state, inter-state and the intra-regional conflicts by studying regions and their 'security complexes',

as the latter is not constrained by simplistic statist interpretations and approaches to maritime security. This approach also pays off when looking at non-traditional security trends and challenges, and the authors do a great job of expounding a policy research perspective on a very impressive range of the same.

In the first chapter, the authors lay out the theory in depth and define a regional security complex as an autonomous locality of insecurity that exhibits certain regionally bounded, inter-state, and mutually affective intra-state security conditions and conduct. They explain how this theory can be used for analysis through the referent role of the state, the importance of regionalism, and the discursive processes of ‘securitization’ and ‘de-securitization’. They further elaborate on how the salient features of an RSC can be extended into the maritime domain. The authors also believe that the concept of security has evolved beyond its traditional ‘militarized roots’ and the state can no longer be the sole referent object of security. The authors draw a picture of the implications of non-traditional threats for the economic development of a region, human (in)security in coastal areas, the blue economy, etc, and remind us that many threats are undeterred by constructed state boundaries.

In the next chapter, the authors highlight how geographical features and historical connections within the Indo-Pacific region have played a role in shaping the existing regional security complexes. Territoriality, for instance, is a permanent feature of an RSC (due to geography) and historical experiences determine identities and construct norms that play a vital role in regional cooperation on security issues. This chapter defines the Indo-Pacific region as the Asian-African-Australian-American maritime littoral space and sheds light on the various formulations of the concept from the perspective of different nations and their bilateral and multilateral arrangements. Three paradigm shifts with broad implications for the region are identified: 1) Economic growth and regional economic integration, 2) the rise of China, and 3) the extra-regional intervention in the West-Asia Gulf region and the Korean Peninsula due to the potential for escalation in these areas.

The authors concern themselves with the maritime regional security complexes of the Indian Ocean and its sub-regions—the North Arabian Sea Crescent (NASC) to the west and the Bay of Bengal to the east—in Chapters 3 to 5. The highly securitized IOR forms an important dimension of the study, and the authors deconstruct the multiple traditional and non-traditional threats that shape the dynamics of maritime securitization in the Indian Ocean. In the case of the NASC (Chapter 4), the destructive impact of irregular insurgency-related conflicts, piracy, and terrorism are examined, and a detailed survey of the region’s strategic relationships with extra-regional powers and their security implications are also presented. The authors view this region as having the highest incidence of hybrid threats, and skilfully explain the serious risk of escalation and breakout of inadvertent conflict that could also have spill-over effects for adjoining regions due to high levels of militarization. Their argument—that Great Power interventions in this region have largely failed to reduce tensions and on the contrary have played a role in aggravating them—is particularly hard-hitting and completely unburdened by ideological confluences. In the next chapter titled ‘Security Dynamics in the Bay of Bengal’, the authors explore many non-traditional security issues, such as oxygen depletion and acidification, natural disasters, marine litter, search and rescue, natural disaster, and the security of the Blue Economy. As mentioned earlier, the value added by including such discussions in the framework of a ‘security complex’ is noteworthy and makes the reader reflect on a grim future that only promises to aggravate the threats, in the absence of extensive cooperation between actors. This chapter also explores the regional dynamics between South Asia and Southeast Asia and provides an overview of various multilateral institutions in the region working towards greater integration and ensuring security.

After carefully laying out the broad themes of security in the IOR, the book turns to the much-discussed and contested regional security complex of the Western Pacific Ocean in Chapter 6. It is in this region where extensive traditional security threats have emerged due to China’s destabilizing

behaviour and growing military power. The authors begin by pointing out that six of the world's ten largest standing militaries are contained in this region and four of them have nuclear weapon capabilities. Great power contestation, severe politico-diplomatic tensions, military infrastructure build-up, and aggressive naval-air posturing, are identified as the key security drivers in this region and the authors aptly use three issues to anchor the larger processes at play. They are, 1) Pacific Deterrence Initiative, 2) the emergence of "Multiple Quads", and 3) China's naval build-up and aggressive exercises in the South China Sea. Some of the most interesting analyses in the book are contained in this chapter and the authors conclude by observing that US-China tensions are unlikely to resolve in the near future and will continue to be one of the most pressing geopolitical issues of this day and age. The final chapter of the book is titled 'Naval Nuclear Dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region', and the authors explain the need for nuclear powers in the region to maintain and develop sea-based deterrence. The logic of mutually-assured destruction continues to prevail in this century, and naval nuclear deployments are viewed as critical for ensuring retaliatory capability in the event of any first strike. The authors also identify the proliferation of delivery vehicles and fissile material stocks of new nuclear states as a highly destabilizing threat that should be monitored and mitigated.

The book's overall assessment of maritime regional security complexes in the Indo-Pacific region stands out as it covers an impressive range of prevalent threats and challenges, which is no small feat given the non-uniformity, complicated nature, and varying scope of security dynamics throughout different parts of the region. By not treating the Indo-Pacific as a monolithic single construct, the authors succeed in bringing out the diversity of security drivers and do not get stuck in the US-China binary. Although a more detailed analysis of some subjects would have been welcome, for example existing mechanisms of mitigation and cooperation on non-traditional threats, the authors perhaps calculated that a brief but comprehensive overview would be more impactful and relevant for policy-makers and research scholars, alike. Likewise, the book would have benefited from policy

## **BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE INDO-PACIFIC**

**Council For Strategic and Defense Research**

recommendations but the authors refrained by design and merely attempted to enrich the debate on various maritime security challenges. In this endeavour, they certainly succeeded and the book's combination of vigorous academic insights with a pragmatic practitioner's perspective is commendable.