

## BOOK REVIEW

***Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century.* Shashi Tharoor. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 2012. Pp. 449.**

Shashi Tharoor, a renowned Indian diplomat and politician wrote *Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century* to substantiate and elaborate the 'Rise of the Rest'. Both the so-called 'Fall of the West' and 'Rise of the Rest' are derivatives of contemporary multi-polar world. The author has articulated a leading role for India in the emerging overlapping, plural world order characterised by both competition and cooperation. The author observes that the globalised world poses threats beyond borders with terrorism seen as a common threat for all.

The writer projects New Indian Order with pious homilies of peace and love for regional connectivity and coexistence with the Russian, Muslim, Chinese, and the Western world. Tharoor says "India therefore has a growing stake in international developments. To put it another way, the food we grow and we eat, the air we breathe and our health, security, prosperity and quality of life are increasingly affected by what happens beyond our borders." (p. 5) While upholding the sub-continental culture, the writer knits the Indian aspirations for the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the Nehruvian dream for peace in the world. Freedom, prosperity, and disaster in this "One world cannot be split into isolated fragments", he says. (p.1)

Tharoor's book, however, paradoxically celebrates the Indian *mantra* of economic self-reliance in a neo-liberal economy; though it condemns the "slavery" it generates. He laments that the Indian sub-continent was already hostage to such a system at the time of East India Company's entry into India: any country "coming with a briefcase would cast suspicions of a neo-imperialism." (p.4) The author, however, conveniently shelves cumulative historical evidence on India's own hegemonic designs in the South Asian region and its barely hidden strategic ambitions in Afghanistan.

Any non-Indian reading the narrative of Tharoor on India's foreign relations, particularly with reference to regional countries, would regard it

as an authentic text book written in eloquent prose. The author, with his rich literary background, can perhaps sway his fellow Indians' opinion. He makes a compelling case for the positive impact India's foreign policy had on common man's life. For sustainable wider strategy, the book recommends realigning regional partnerships and strengthening relations with extra-regional powers through cultural, intellectual, and social exchanges. With that prism, Tharoor also suggests rapid enlargement of Indian diplomatic service in order to assume new global responsibilities. He also advocates inclusive politics to reduce income disparities within India and in this context he particularly mentions six hundred million people living below the poverty line.

The book regrettably repeats myths about the Pakistan army and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) by accusing them of being behind most of the problems of the region. His recipe to "resolve" this problem is: "The more we grow and flourish in the world the more difficult we make it for the Pakistani military" (p.74), and that New Delhi needs to make it certain that "Islamabad establishment abandons the conviction that terrorism is the only effective instrument that obliges India to sit up and pay attention to Pakistan and engage with its interests." (p.81) Nowhere does the author allude to the fact that India has been using Afghanistan as a second front against Pakistan.

The book dilates on India's "Go East" policy. India has remarkably used its cultural strength and Buddhist historical linkages to promote *Pax Indica*. But the writer fails to factor in the rise of *Hindutva*. Nowhere does the author highlight formidable challenges posed to Hindu polity by *Hindutva*, forced conversion of minorities and raging insurgencies in many parts of India. Massive violations by Indian security forces do not find a place in the book.

The book is written with India's aspirations to outstrip China, but its narrative is much broader. The author peddles India's strategic pretensions that it would create spheres of influence beyond its sovereign territory and erect an alternative construct in international politics to match *Pax Americana*.

*Pax Indica*, as Tharoor himself admits is a “work of reflection and not scholarship” based on the ancient notions of *Pax Romana* and the more recent concepts of *Pax Britannia* and *Pax Americana*. By and large, the book is a reflection of India’s optimistic aspirations, as the cover of the book itself suggests, to become the leading force along with China, if not globally, than at least in Asia and the Arab World - what Tharoor calls the “Near Abroad”. But even as he professes the dance of the Indian Elephant with regional and global ambitions, he remains dismissive of India’s regional neighbours and their individual identities as sovereign nations, claiming instead that the underpinning of their nationalisms has been derived from their anxiety to differentiate themselves from the Indian metanarrative. He conveniently forgets that historically, India had never been one country and that it had been a collection of 565 princely states, many of which acceded to one or other of the two new independent nations of India and Pakistan between 1947 and 1949. As a South Asian reader, one cannot help but get the feeling that Tharoor is building up on “Mahaan Bharat” without taking into consideration the perspectives of its smaller neighbours. Time and again, the narrative stresses that it is India’s neighbours that must realise that their salvation lies in the growth of India, and not the other way round.

In his endeavor for India to think globally, Tharoor fails to recommend that India’s geopolitical strategists need to, first and foremost, act regionally. The venom and hostility against Pakistan, particularly its “malign men”, is evident throughout the narrative, ubiquitously referring to Israel’s action against neighbouring territories and why India could not do the same in terms of Pakistan. Focusing entirely on the 2008 Mumbai attacks the Chapter “Brother Enemy” presents arguments that can only be expected from an Indian official and not an objective writer who would attempt to present the true reasons of Pakistan’s insecurity that in fact lie in India’s own unwillingness to accept the reality of Pakistani state, choosing instead to make assertions that “lasting peace would leave Pakistan without its *raison d’etre*” that can only come from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs.

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