

## BOOK REVIEW

***Great Powers in the Changing International Order.* Nick Bisley.  
New Delhi: Viva Books Pvt Ltd., 2016. Pp. 209.**

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The whole concept of international relations is changing with the change in polarity. The Cold War international order based on a bipolar world has now been replaced by a multipolar one where the revolutions in communications, transportation and warfighting capabilities are bringing about changes in the way the distribution and exercise of power is increasingly being questioned by students of international relations. While the Cold War system was largely based on the presence of two major powers – United States and the Soviet Union – which provided security for their respective block members, the new post-Cold War system is rapidly changing with the rise of new “emerging” powers – the success of China and India, the return of Russia, the confidence of Brazil, and the expanded and consolidated EU. This new configuration is changing the behaviour of allied countries after the end of the Cold War, where playing the game of power politics is changing the very nature of international relations and the way the great powers, as well as the United Nations, are becoming irrelevant to the great power “managerialism” of international order in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These are the questions that have been examined in great detail by Nick Bisley, Professor of International Relations at La Trobe University, in his book titled *Great Powers in the Changing International Order*.

Of course, the question of the status of great powers and their role has been of perennial importance to practitioners and students of International Relations, grounded in the works by, among others, Hans J. Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz and John Gaddis. Readers of Bisley will find him questioning the notions by the great masters, and raising four important questions: What role does great power “managerialism” play in

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international order?; How did this idea emerge?; Can it provide order in a globalizing international system?; and, What does the status of the idea of the great powers tell us about the nature of international order in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Bisely's intellectual prowess is impressive in his examination of these questions and the way the structure of international politics is being remade. In trying to provide an understanding of the emerging new international order, he examines the origins of the idea of great power "managerialism" in various modern legal modern settlements – Westphalia, Utrecht, Vienna, San Francisco – and how these settlements provided special privileges to great powers for their role in maintaining international order? (Chapter 2), and how this role became integrated into the formal structures – the League of Nations, the United Nations - that emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? (Chapters 3-4). The question that how relevant and appropriate is the role accorded to great powers under these settlements in contemporary times has been examined in Chapter 5, particularly after the damage done to the US by the Bush administration and the global financial crisis of 2008-9. Grounded in the historical examination of great powers' evolution, Bisely questions the conventional wisdom in the scholarship of International Relations and the broader political discourse over the 21<sup>st</sup> century that whether it would still be relevant to consider this century to be as "American" (Chapter 6). Of particular interest to the students of contemporary International Relations would be the implications of the emergence of new global powers – China, India, Russia, the European Union and South Africa, and how the growth of their economic, political and military influence is affecting the existing system of world politics? (Chapter 7).

Certainly, the arguments present in the text are not new; however, the conclusions in Chapter 8 do seek to vindicate the central argument of the book that the managerial conception of international order and the particular role of the great powers within that order constitute an outdated approach to organising international relations. The author presents an alternative approach to organising international relations by a restructuring of the United Nations Security Council which is "seen increasingly as less legitimate both because the permanent members

reflect an outdated distribution of power, and also because concentrations of power are no longer thought to be acceptable to determine status” (p.180).

Most of Bisely’s arguments regarding the legitimacy and relevance of judicious diplomacy, the institutional process and the exercise of power under the banner of uniploraity of United States may appeal to the realist and mercantilist schools of thought. Nevertheless, the emergence of new power centers in contemporary times do beg answers to the truism that great powers still shape the parameters of life in contemporary international system, and would find much appeal among the liberal school of thought, particularly in Asia, where China, and a re-emerging Russia seek to question the Western notions of economic and political order in their own interest. In a literature filled with the rise of a unipolar world over the last decade, and no sustained examination of the role that great powers play in international society, the book seeks to fill the gaps by questioning the anarchical realm where the concentration of power, particularly military, still matters.

But even as Bisely discusses the limits and shortcomings of the pivotal players of the old order, for example their failure to deal with important issues like the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, the unwillingness of Europe and the US to liberalise their agricultural markets, the skewed nature of decision-making processes of the World Bank and the IMF, and the unwillingness of the UNSC to cope with a number of problems (pp.144-45), he believes that the Western “Concert” style of maintaining order is still a practical one because the emerging powers like China and India lack, and are unlikely to reinforce, “an aristocratic conception of how international order should be managed” (p.181). This argument somehow seems based on hubris, and borders on dismissal of China’s legitimacy as a great power keeping in view the phenomenal rise of Peoples Republic of China on the international arena both in terms of its economic and military modernisations. What seems lacking in the interesting analysis is Bisley’s consideration of the question whether the Western “Concert” would ever consider sharing power with the new rising Asian “Concert” rather than a continuous

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propagation of Western great powership through confrontation, for example in the Asia-Pacific littoral.

To be sure, as non-Western powers acquire power and influence, the transformative effects of globalization are driving changes in strategies of states and reducing the effectiveness of the post-Westphalian political and economic order. This is the question that will be upper most among students of international politics as we progress into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In that, the book will be of riveting interest to students and laymen alike.