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Book Review

Geoffrey F. Gresh. *To Rule Eurasia's Waves: The New Great Power Competition at Sea*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020, pp. 363, $ 40, ISBN 9780300234848.

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In a world where concepts such as Indo-Pacific are prominent in strategic thinking, Geoffrey F. Gresh, in his comprehensive work *To Rule Eurasia's Waves: The New Great Power Competition at Sea*, sketches the concept called the 'Maritime Eurasia', whose geographical stretch engulfs even a 'mega-region'[1] called the Indo-Pacific. The author, however, nowhere explicitly defines the geographical scope of Eurasia. Inferring from his usage throughout the book, it is understandable that his concept of Eurasia encompasses the whole of Europe and Asia, from the Baltic, the Black, and the Mediterranean seas to the Arctic, the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. 'Mental Maps' do matter, for they provide clairvoyance to the strategic imperative of states.[2] How maps are made and presented matters because they impact how the powerful understand the world. For instance, the U.S., by presenting the concept of Indo-Pacific, showcase its strategic priority, while Russia and China do not subscribe to such conceptualisation. On the same note, Gresh's geographical conceptualisation of a 'Maritime Eurasia' from the Baltics to the Pacific underlines his holistic and integrated approach in prioritising means to address the changes in the region and upcoming challenges to American interests. Albeit scholars have differed on the concept of 'Eurasia', the author's idea of Eurasia is certainly not confined to Russia and the post-Soviet states.

The book's core argument is that as America withdraws from Eurasia, the real competition occurs across maritime Eurasia between the continent's main rivals (Russia, China, and India) as they seek great power status and expand their influence beyond their regional seas. The burgeoning security concerns, ensued by the maritime geoeconomic interests of the actors in maritime Eurasia, are making the possibility of an inadvertent outbreak of conflicts at sea highly likely. As Russia, India, and China depend on key sea lanes and maritime choke points to keep their economy alive and for energy needs, they have commenced focussing on blue-water naval capabilities to protect their maritime investments and interests. Moreover, the great power status as a crucial element in the foreign policy of these states necessitates the command of the sea.

Russian culture was not merely limited to its territory, but also outward-oriented. Russian behaviour – seaward thrust, naval modernisation, and naval bases – in the Baltic and the Black Sea region is driven by its regional history and the need for warm-water ports. Gresh aptly mentions that maintaining its naval capacity across maritime areas from Europe, the Arctic, to the Pacific has become increasingly difficult for Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union. It would be even more unsustainable, especially in the post-Ukraine war, when Russia is reeling under a resource crunch. Nevertheless, the strategic necessity would compel it to remain invested in maritime regions.[3] For Russia, controlling the Baltic and the Black Sea regions is crucial for maritime trade, energy security, and geostrategic reasons. Russia is cooperating with China for now as the latter's geoeconomic interests are penetrating the Baltic Sea, Black Sea, and Mediterranean region as well. As China's geoeconomic interests and the aspiration to build independent maritime supply and logistics routes, followed by the active presence of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in Russia's backyard, heighten, the former would be a bigger challenge to the latter's geoeconomic and geostrategic interests. However, by citing strategic necessity as a reason for Russia to expand seaward, Gresh dilutes the weight of his argument that the expansion is engraved in 'Russian culture'. Undoubtedly, the search for warm ports, for instance, has been a part of the so-called 'Russian culture' due to the geographical constant; however, the author fails to expand on how Russia's push to the seas to protect its sea lanes and interests differs from the similar attempts by other Eurasian states. This reasoning, while being situated in cultural hues, can equally be objected to for lack of its 'cultural' uniqueness. This double-edged aspect of the argument has been overlooked by Gresh.

Apart from the core arguments throughout the book, the book is mainly descriptive, with a motley of data on strategic imperatives, geoeconomic investments, and naval orientation of the Eurasian actors – primarily Russia, China, and India. Gresh vividly describes the Chinese geoeconomic investments in European states (Greece, Italy, Spain, and others), the Mediterranean region (Turkey, Israel, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt), and the Indian Ocean Region (Djibouti, Sri Lanka, Pakistan). Likewise, he elucidates on Indian investments and maritime security orientation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and elsewhere. While the rising navalism in the Mediterranean and Red Sea regions portends room for interaction and joint engagements between Russia, China, and other regional navies, the IOR is marked by intense security competition between China, on the one hand, and India, the U.S. and its allies, on the other. Gresh reads between the lines on major Chinese investments in ports throughout the IOR and Mediterranean, though they may not appear to be militarily concerning in the short term. These investments are of a 'dual-use' nature. They can serve as logistics for the Chinese PLAN in case it intends to carry out some military operations or deny its adversaries easy access to critical sea lanes.[4] For India, Gresh argues, owing to bureaucratic sluggishness and lack of deep pockets, it would become increasingly complex to preserve its sway in the IOR. China's fast-paced investments in advanced submarines, unmanned and crewless subsurface and undersea vessels, and deep pockets would cause angst in Indian foreign and security brass.

On the contrary, India is nowhere near China's strategic and economic engagements in the South China Sea (SCS). Though India has tried to connect with the Southeast Asian States (through the Act East) and has launched various maritime programmes centred on the Indo-Pacific, such as SAGAR (Security and Growth for All) and Project Mausam, their implementation remains dwarfed due to the paucity of funds. The SCS is crucial for China for fisheries, shipping, logistics, energy resources, and larger security and great power reasons. China has largely militarised various outposts in the SCS and seeks to attain command of the sea in the East Sea. For Gresh, as China shapes this region geoeconomically, it would assist her in 'larger geostrategic objectives to push deeper into maritime Eurasia, boxing out other competitors along the way' (p. 204). He presents three aspects of increasing Chinese navalism: rising investments in ships and personnel; the buildup of A2/AD (Anti-Access/Area-Denial) capabilities on artificial islands; and more maritime aggression and naval exercises, including those with Russia. While Russia largely depends on the Mediterranean and North African states to access the warm waters of the Western Indian Ocean Region, it has mainly been working with China in East Asia and its commercial markets. Therefore, Russia is ardent in developing its Russian Far East (RFE), a critical jumping-off point into East Asia. However, he is assiduous in assessing that Russia has its own *sui generis* interests and engagement with the states in the SCS, especially Vietnam. Russia not only exports defence equipment to Vietnam, but its Gazprom has cooperated with Vietnamese firms to explore several offshore oil projects, including in areas that China claims in the SCS. Despite a 'strategic partnership' with China, there are limits to this relationship, including institutional and historical mistrust. On the downside, he does not mention the lack of a largely common ground for cooperation between Russia and the U.S. and its allies in countering China in the former's neighbourhood. China seems more promising to the West than Russia on the economic front.

Notably, the author has dedicated a chapter to the Arctic. It is referred to as maritime Eurasia's future frontier. He argues that the melting of Arctic ice reinforces the view that maritime Eurasia will become more interconnected via its sea lanes, north–south and east–west, if current trends continue. This development increases securitisation as each state pushes to protect its geoeconomic interests. Russia has already commenced investing more substantially in its Northern Fleet and Arctic bases, ice breakers, natural resource exploration, and scientific research, and it is partnering with China to leverage shifting maritime transit routes. This frontier is crucial for China, too, as it desires to avoid murky waters and the strategic maritime choke points of southern Eurasia. Russia-China cooperation is understandable as Russia needs significant Chinese monetary investment to explore the resources and develop its Arctic and RFE, and the fact that China voraciously needs energy supplies, and Russia has it.

Apart from a thick and vivid description supporting the core argument in several chapters, some arguments seem repetitive within the same chapter. On the positive side, the author presents some assiduous policy recommendations to manage increased maritime navalism. Specifically, to counter Chinese maritime aggression, he has recommended the effort to 'drive a wedge between Russia and China' (p. 274).[5] He argues that as the liberal global order declines and emerging Eurasian powers such as Russia, China, and India begin to assert themselves on the world stage, it is leading to the intensifying maritime embrace and increased navalism. However, the book lacks any definition of international order. Several criteria to measure the rise or decline of an international order are missing, which leaves the argument that 'the liberal global order is declining' largely unsubstantiated. Gresh's claim could have been augmented with empirical evidence on the level of institutionalisation, assessment of polarity, degree of compliance with international regimes or norms, legitimacy surveys across states, trade flows and interdependence, and a comparison of the liberal order and the one promoted by Eurasian powers. Nevertheless, this book is unique as it offers an integrated image of maritime space across the full breadth of the Eurasian landmass, from north to south and east to west. On the one hand, it emphasises how the maritime space of Eurasia is integrated, more so after the possible melting of the Arctic. On the other, it revives the Atlanticists v Eurasianism debate.[6] It vouches for an alternative area of focus – away from compartmentalised Indo-Pacific or a limited Eurasia to an integrated maritime Eurasia from China to the Baltics – for American strategists and the President to deal with. This book is recommended to anyone interested in seeing how the transition in global order and increased maritime embrace of states impact the security configuration of the world.

Acknowledgement

I, Anshu Kumar, acknowledge that this work is original and has not been published anywhere. It is currently not under consideration for publication elsewhere.

Notes

1. See Sundararaman, S. (2023). Understanding the Indo-Pacific: Historical context and evolving dynamics. In B. Kratiuk, J. V. D. Bosch, A. Jaskólska, & Y. Sato (Eds.), *Handbook of the Indo-Pacific* (pp. 11–28). Routledge India.
2. See Medcalf, R. (2013, October 10). *The Indo-Pacific: what's in a Name?* The American Interest.
3. Despite cost overruns and bureaucratic ineptitude of Russian naval programmes, Russia launched two major ports (Vysotsky and Lugaport) in the Baltic Sea region and inaugurated Anaklia deep sea port in the Black Sea region amidst the Ukraine War.
4. It is similar to the research which looks at Chinese maritime investments worldwide through their 'dual-use' capability. If Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) control or maintain operational control over their overseas ports and these ports are close to critical chokepoints and sea lanes, it gives the PLAN the ability to carry out intelligence collection and a number of combat and naval operations conducive to the Chinese Communist Party. See, Kardon, I. B., & Leutert, W. (2022). Pier Competitor: China's Power Position in Global Ports. *International Security*, 46(4), 9–47.
5. This effort was visible during the initial months of Donald Trump's second term. However, this is not to claim that the author's recommendations may have influenced Trump's vision.
6. It somehow reifies the contrast between a unipolar world, which is led by the U.S., and a multipolar world led by Eurasian powers.