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**S. Mahmud Ali. *Asia-Pacific Security Dynamics in the Obama Era: A New World Emerging*. London & New York: Routledge. 2012.**

S. Mahmud Ali's new book attempts to capture the transformation of Asia-Pacific international relations during the Obama presidency, focusing on the realm of security and military interactions among major players. As the author points out, after eight years of President George W. Bush's unilateralism and inclination to resort to military intervention, President Barack Obama has developed a new strategy to reach out to regional allies and strengthen multilateral cooperation. The book succeeds in depicting some of the complex and still changing dynamics of the region's security landscape, which features both cooperation and competition among major powers.

The book is organized in four chapters, with a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue records the changes across the Pacific, best reflected in the political demise of leaders who had forged with President Bush a "democratic alliance" in Asia—Prime Ministers John Howard of Australia, Junichiro Koizumi of Japan, and Atal Behari Vajpayee of India. Chapter one examines how the dynamic interaction of cooperation and competition shaped the Obama administration's early stance toward China. Chapter two discusses the fluidity of security interactions among regional great powers. With Japan and Australia formally allied to America and India increasingly so aligned, these actors developed inter-relationships with respect to security in parallel with their formal alliance with the United States. The resulting "Quad" alliance emerged as a countervailing front against China's growing power: With Quad members intensifying naval collaboration in the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the various straits linking these maritime domains, China felt increasingly hemmed in. Chapter three explores the dynamics reshaping US-Russian interactions. Among the most critical gains made between the two nations over the past decade were an agreement to place their Cold War legacy behind them, treat each other with respect, and cooperate in areas of shared interest. These led to further agreements on collaboration on a range of other issues. However, residual mistrust continues to frustrate the two countries. Chapter four examines the implications of changing Sino-US dynamics in Southeast Asia. The congruence of US "national interests" with those of Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore reinforced the coalescence of a suspected containment-coalition around China. The epilogue addresses the forces driving systemic shifts in the Asia-Pacific region, along with their likely outcomes.

The new US strategy that combines cooperation and competition reflects Washington's "hedging" strategy in the context of China's rise. The strategic backdrop against which Obama assumed office and developed the new policy included a China that was growing in stature and comprehensive national power, which appeared to indicate to the West that China's influence should neither be overlooked nor underestimated. Still, there is no evidence that China poses a direct or immediate challenge to either America or the US-led order (p. 18). As such, says the author, both cooperation and competition will define US-China relations in the near future.

While the book does a fine job in addressing some of the complex issues in Asia-Pacific security and raises some key questions for further study, it suffers from several weaknesses. First, it focuses on the narrowly defined security and military aspects of state-to-state interactions. While the author's modest approach (intended to avoid the complexity of myriad dynamics and to allow deeper examination of the status of the security milieu) (p. xiii) is understandable, such a narrow focus may have defeated its own purpose. Indeed, the book fails

to discuss the heavily interdependent nature of relations among major powers. One wonders how it is possible to talk about security today purely from a military perspective when security issues have expanded to include economics, energy, finance, food, climate, etc.

The book, excluding the prologue, epilogue, and notes, contains only about 120 pages, so the author could well have further developed the thesis and presented a more comprehensive discussion of the security issue, drawing reference from such key non-military interactions as economic and cultural exchanges. As the author admits in the preface, the book draws largely on primary documents from foreign ministries and the defense establishment of major players in the region. The more holistic views from civilians, scholars, non-governmental organizations, and other non-military personnel are not sufficiently heard in the book. For example, the author highlights the so-called “AirSea Battle” (p. xiv, xvii, 139-42, 157, 166) as a new operational concept of the US Navy and Air Force under President Obama that was designed to deter China from any use of military force, and, if such deterrence fails, defeat the People’s Liberation Army of China if necessary. Obviously, the author considers such a purely military approach to be the most critical with respect to security dynamics across the Pacific. What is missing is a discussion of the equally, if not more, important security mechanism that currently exists between the two powers: the U.S. and China Security and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), which was also developed under President Obama. Apparently, even the Obama administration itself understands that security must broadly cover both military and economic dimensions. That’s probably why the Obama administration, recognizing the complexity of Sino-US relations, has resisted pressure from US Congress and other conservative forces to label China a “currency manipulator.” After all, China’s rise cannot be viewed only from a realist perspective; one must take into account the interdependent relationship as one sizes up security challenges China presents.

Second, the book addresses the security dynamics among several major players in the region, namely the United States, China, Japan, Australia, India, Russia, and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). What the author could have added, even briefly, is the discussion of the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula— potentially two of the most explosive hotspots in East Asia. In Taiwan, Kuomintang’s Ma Ying-jeou was re-elected in the presidential election in January 2012, which was met with grief in both Washington and Beijing since Ma has worked to stabilize relations across the Taiwan Strait since he was first elected in 2008, ending eight years of confrontational policies by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration of Chen Shui-bian. Indeed, relations across the Taiwan Strait are expected to be stable in the near future, which removes a major security obstacle between the United States and China. Despite these accomplishments, however, not all is reassuring. In this most recent election, the DPP candidate Tsai Ing-wen, who considers Taiwan and China two separate countries, still received about 45% of the votes. The DPP has every chance to return to power in the future. If that happens, and if the DPP does not modify its anti-China ideology, tensions across the Taiwan Strait will ensue, which has the potential to drag the United States into a war with China. The book does raise US arms sales to Taiwan as a point of contention between the United States and China, but the independence movement in Taiwan as a trigger of cross-Strait conflict needs to be addressed in this context.

On the Korean Peninsula, Kim Jong-un, only in his late 20s, is still consolidating power after the sudden death of his father, Kim Jong-il, in December 2011. Initial evidence suggests that the younger Kim will carry on the *songun* (military first) policy, and it is unclear whether he will introduce the Chinese-style reform policies into North Korea. Lest we forget, North Korea is

now nuclear-capable. Any miscalculation on its part (or on the part of anybody else in the region) may result in an ugly scenario that nobody wants to see. How to deal with the eventual collapse of North Korea is a thorny issue that China and the United States have not addressed together. The United States and China have much to gain if they can cooperate and manage the delicate situations in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula. Unfortunately, the book fails to fully address these two major, perhaps most serious, challenges in Asia-Pacific security.

Finally, the book lacks a theoretical framework. It is largely descriptive, which the author handles fairly well. But without a clearly defined theory to explain and understand Asia-Pacific security, the book's analytical power does not seem very strong. For example, as the author suggests, the rising force of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the most critical factor in the new security structure of the Asia-Pacific region. However, if one only focuses on *capability*, without also looking at the PLA's *willingness* to use force, the discussion is incomplete. Indeed, as Chinese leaders reiterate, China's top priority is economic development; it will not and cannot challenge or threaten any other nation (p. 44). The author touched upon this, but did not further develop it. One way of adding analytical strength to the book would perhaps be to link domestic politics and foreign policy using the inter-mestic perspective. China's domestic security challenges seem much more severe than external ones. That's why, in recent years, China's budget to maintain domestic stability (*wei wen*) has surpassed its military expenditure. The PLA, in its own view, is a defensive force, not an aggressive one.

To capture the emerging, still fluid new security picture in Asia-Pacific is perhaps a mission impossible. As such, Ali's efforts are laudable. Yet key questions about Asia-Pacific security in the Obama era remain unanswered. This is unfortunate since one might wish to be enlightened as to what, exactly, the new security dynamics in the region are.

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