

***Divergent Worlds: What the Ancient Mediterranean and Indian Ocean Can Tell Us About the Future of International Order.* By Amitav Acharya and Manjeet S. Pardesi. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2025. Hardcover: 248pp.**

What will a post-American international order look like? Hegemonic stability theory suggests that the decline of American hegemony will lead to chaos and disorder unless another hegemon steps in. In *Divergent Worlds*, Amitav Acharya and Manjeet S. Pardesi propose an alternative vision: a multiplex international order in which multiple actors coexist and interact without relying on the individual or collective hegemony of great powers. They argue that such an order is not merely a theoretical possibility but a historical reality, as illustrated by the classical Indian Ocean order, which spanned China, India and Southeast Asia between the first and fifteenth centuries.

To show that international orders can endure without a hegemon, the authors contrast the multiplex order of the classical Indian Ocean with the hegemonic order of the Roman Mediterranean, which existed between the sixth century BCE and the third century CE. In the Roman Mediterranean, Rome constructed a core–periphery system by controlling trade routes, enforcing maritime peace through naval power and absorbing the cultures of conquered peoples, especially the Greeks (Chapter Two). By contrast, the classical Indian Ocean operated without a hegemon, with China and India largely remaining passive and not pursuing Roman-style control of sea lanes (Chapter Three). Instead, this regional order was shaped by the active agency of South Asian mandala polities and merchant groups. As carriers of trade and connectivity across maritime Asia, these actors participated in the Chinese tributary system while localizing Indic ideas, together constituting a nonhegemonic, decentred and multiplex order.

*Divergent Worlds* extends this historical argument through a second comparison: the classical Indian Ocean and the contemporary Indo-Pacific (Chapter Four). Acharya and Pardesi argue that the Indo-Pacific is evolving into a multiplex order that more closely resembles the Indian Ocean model than the Roman Mediterranean one. Although the region is often portrayed as a central arena of the US-China rivalry, the authors emphasize that the emerging regional order is characterized by the absence of a hegemonic

power (American or Chinese), mutually reinforcing politico-military and politico-economic interactions, and greater agency of Southeast Asian states.

The book's comparisons open up two questions for scholars and practitioners concerned with the Indo-Pacific and its future. First, while Acharya and Pardesi contend that the Indo-Pacific will likely resemble the classical Indian Ocean, this remains an open question. Indeed, one reason the classical Indian Ocean became a multiplex order was that its larger neighbours were either unable or unwilling to impose hegemony. Southeast Asia was "not generally worthy of Chinese concern" as it was merely "a realm of 'squirming worms'" and posed no maritime threats (p. 83). Therefore, Chinese empires sought to incorporate Southeast Asia into a tributary system rather than dominate the region by force. India was "a decentered politico-cultural realm, especially after the collapse of the Gupta empire" (p. 103) and was also unable to claim centrality in the Indian Ocean.

In contrast, the contemporary Indo-Pacific is increasingly becoming the main stage of the US-China strategic competition. The Trump administration's 2025 National Security Strategy declared that "the Indo-Pacific is already and will continue to be among the next century's key economic and geopolitical battlegrounds. To thrive at home, we must successfully compete there—and we are." To contest Washington's vision of the "Indo-Pacific", China has instead adhered to the concept of the "Asia-Pacific", emphasizing that the region is large enough to accommodate both countries. If the region continues to harden into a battleground where Washington and Beijing concentrate their capabilities and compete over core interests, its trajectory may diverge from that of the classical Indian Ocean.

Second, the unity of Southeast Asia warrants closer analytical attention. In the classical Indian Ocean, regional actors were central to creating order; today, Southeast Asian states are similarly consequential. The norms and institutions of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have been built collectively and now constitute key building blocks of the emerging regional order. Southeast Asian states have also articulated their own vision of the Indo-Pacific, established intra-regional minilateral arrangements for maritime security, and engaged the United States, China, and India while rejecting the hegemony of any single power. However, the agency of Southeast Asian states depends not only on material

capabilities but also on unity, which will be increasingly tested as the United States and China pull them towards their respective sides. Although Acharya and Pardesi voice concerns about Southeast Asian unity, this issue is not examined in comparable analytical depth. Given that the Indo-Pacific is shaped not only by the US-China competition but also by “cultural diversity and ideological pluralism” (p. 161), a more systematic assessment of the challenges and opportunities facing Southeast Asian unity would further strengthen the book’s argument.

*Divergent Worlds* offers a useful guide for rethinking the concepts of international order and the regional dynamics of the Indo-Pacific from a historical perspective. Theoretically, Acharya and Pardesi bring the history of maritime Asia into International Relations scholarship, thereby challenging a Western conception of international order rooted in the Greco-Roman precedent, which associates the provision of collective goods with the presence of a hegemonic power. Methodologically, they provide a compelling example of macro-historical and comparative research on regional orders that elucidates the dynamics of maritime Asia, past and present. Foremost, the book should substantially enrich debates about the future of the Indo-Pacific, which currently overemphasize the role of great powers while neglecting the agency of other actors.

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