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Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

C Raja Mohan

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In this book an eloquent analyst turns the strategic thinking spotlight on the ‘Indo-Pacific’ maritime region, viewed from the perspective of emerging India-China confrontation. C Raja Mohan’s central hypothesis is that Beijing and New Delhi face the classic ‘strategic dilemma’: actions by each to build up military, air power and naval capability, offensive or defensive in character, are perceived as a threat by the other, and produce reactions, which feed into this mutual process. Their needs for ‘resource security’, as major importers of energy and other raw materials, also enhance their dependence on the security of sea-lanes and consequently their maritime rivalry. The fact that each is an actor on a multidimensional stage, jousting with other players, engaged in a maritime theater that imposes its compulsions that flow from geography, complexifies the process. Further, each state has the discretion to mutually deploy mitigating factors, as also enter into engagements with the other countries, large and miniscule. This adds up to a veritable churning of the oceans, evoking the mythical *Samudra Manthan* contest between angels and demons of the Indian epics, captured so vividly in the enormous Khmer fresco at Angkor Wat.

The book follows a clear thematic framework. After an overview introduction, the reader is taken to a survey of India-China relations, before picking up the central maritime theme, the changing mission of the navies of the two countries, and

possibilities of nuclear weapon deployment. The book then examines India's moves in the Pacific Ocean and China's actions in the Indian Ocean.

The security dilemma of India and China is studied with reference to their moves in the island states of the Indian Ocean, the Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles and Sri Lanka. The book next turns to the competitive logic that drives Indian and Chinese moves vis-à-vis the littoral states of the Indo-Pacific. India's Look East Policy, which began with focus on ASEAN, has stretched at the end of the 1990s to a sustained political, strategic and maritime presence in the Asia Pacific, regardless of Indian non-membership of key groupings such as APEC. Raja Mohan weaves together a masterly overview of continental and maritime policy. For instance, he describes how in relation to its western landlocked provinces, China has shifted from a policy of guarding them from foreign subversive influences to a 'forward policy' that influences the regions across its borders, aiming at a Lhasa-Kolkata corridor, a Karakoram corridor to Gwadar and Karachi and an Irrawaddy corridor from Yunnan through Myanmar to the Bay of Bengal. Each of these three involves massive infrastructure and political challenge; a Tibet link to the Indo-Gangetic valley confronts India-China distrust; rail links across the Hindu Kush to Pakistan's seacoast must overcome mountains as well as Pakistan's fractured polity; the link through Myanmar may be taking shape through this year's four-country decision on a 'BCIM economic corridor'. An Indian may ask: do we have a longterm vision of where we want our ties with Myanmar, Vietnam and South Korea to go over the next decade and more? Or is such forward planning simply not the Indian way?

One chapter considers the ways in which the two countries might mitigate their security dilemma, through effective management of their bilateral relationship, an understudied issue. It makes two key points. Since the 1980s, India and China have engaged in mutual confidence building measures. Even while strategic

analysts on both sides have tended to paint worst-case scenarios and questioned each other's motivation, the governments in Beijing and New Delhi have striven to manage the relationship, with agreements on handling the border issue, military and naval exercises, and expanding mutual communication, including the April 2012 agreement on a maritime security dialogue. The Indian submarine incident in the Gulf of Aden in January 2009 and a ship encounter in the South China Sea in July 2011 point to a need for an 'incidents at sea' agreement, as the US and the Soviet Union developed during the Cold War (201). Is it practical for either country to persuade the other to accept its exclusivity or dominance in the Indian Ocean for India and in East China and the Western Pacific for China? The author rejects this as unfeasible, not the least because it would be opposed by neighbors and by other great powers. It is better for the two countries to mitigate misperceptions of each other's interests, and demonstrate some sensitivity for the concerns of the other. This means for India to understand China's energy access and trade route concerns in the Indian Ocean, and for China to appreciate the legitimacy of India's Indian Ocean expansion, plus its openness to collaboration with Southeast Asian nations, and with the US. The author's conclusion: 'a substantive and open-ended dialogue between the security establishments on maritime and naval issues has become an urgent imperative' (208).

The final two chapters examine the consequences of India-China rivalry on the Indo-Pacific regional order, and the emerging triangular dynamic between these two rising powers and the long-dominant US. Raja Mohan postulates three possibilities: cooperative security, which does not sit well with the worldviews of either Beijing or New Delhi; an 'Asian concert' on the lines of what subsisted in Europe in the 19th century, could grow out of the current sets of bilateral and trilateral dialogue underway among the different powers; and a balance of power, which is also possible through mutual adaptation between the regional powers. He concludes that decisionmakers in China and India will become more open to cooperative mechanisms as they rise, without giving up autonomy in favor of

multilateralism (234). But the key, he argues in the final chapter, is the US role vis-à-vis China and India.

In effect a triangular interaction is emerging, in which China is set to overtake the US in the gross size of its economy by 2020, but in little else, and where India is the weakest element of the triumvirate, but thereby possessing a swing characteristic. For Washington DC, China is the main challenge and India a putative strategic partner. And then there is the 'G-2' possibility, despite its internal contradictions. Former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's proposal for a trilateral dialogue, naturally welcome to India, did not find a Chinese response. Raja Mohan concludes: the triangular dynamic 'would produce many fascinating twists and turns...For the moment, though, the interests of India and the United States might be in greater convergence than with those of China. New Delhi and Washington have big problems translating that congruence into an effective coalition. China has more cards to play...' (258). Some would question whether congruence can play out so easily, and whether it serves India's real interests. Rather, India may find it more profitable to play its own kind of balancing role, without opting for a US embrace.

Raja Mohan's master narrative underscores the relative neglect of the maritime dimension by both countries in their early years of independence – it was their opening up to the world economy and globalization that brought the continental states to a realization of the importance of sea power. One observes that Russia is largely absent from this work, as is Australia; each of them is a significant player in the Asian dynamic, and merits closer attention.

The author places much weight on the writings of historian KM Panikkar on the importance of sea power for India, and his vision of a resurgent India in Asia (the

index notes 12 entries against his name). Panikkar wrote in the middle of the last century, and could not anticipate the rise of China, nor of course the way Asia has developed. One should note that Panikkar's perspicacity turned out to be dismally flawed, when he served as India's first envoy to the People's Republic of China (1950-52), when he unfortunately misguided New Delhi with what amounted to bad advice on the policy and motivation of China, owing to his gullibility.

Raja Mohan has produced a masterful treatise on the maritime dimension of the current Asian dynamic. This book is the definitive, must-read work for any *aficionado* of the strategic interplay among the Indo Pacific powers.

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