

Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, by C. Raja Mohan, New Delhi: Oxford University Press (South Asia Edition), 2013, pp. 329, INR 895

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Samudra Manthan is a book whose time has come. It brings to the table the other dimension of the Sino-Indian rivalry, which is often missed by the larger group of policymakers: the maritime and naval aspects of the relationship. Raja Mohan borrows from Indian mythology in selecting the name of this lucid and well-researched account of the emerging frontiers of Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. He believes that ‘the churning of the seas’ is inevitable as the maritime interests of both nations converge in the large expanse of the waters of the Indian and Pacific oceans—hence, the Indo-Pacific. The author argues that, essentially, the strategic interplays between the three maritime powers in the Indo-Pacific, namely, the United States (US), China and India will determine the future course of security in the region. The commonality of the US and Indian interests—despite an ambivalent India and the growing strategic engagement between the US and China in the background of the former’s rebalancing to East Asia—will ensure the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Yet, he warns that this triangular relationship would be fragile and a ‘tipping point’ could easily be reached wherein growing Chinese assertiveness and aggressive behaviour may drive India towards the US, abandoning their ‘current strategic inhibitions’.

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Tracing the early history of both civilizations, the author argues that the development of naval power by both India and China has been influenced by Mahanian thought. Although the 1962 war was restricted to the land frontiers only, its overarching impact on the psyche of the Indian security planners continues to be a defining issue in the relationship. For both India and China, the centrality of the peripheries has been a major cause of mistrust: Tibet and Xinjiang for China; and Jammu and Kashmir and the North East for India. And now, the growing dependence on seaborne trade at a staggering 90 per cent approximately for both emerging powers has brought the oceans to the forefront of the relations.

The Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is undergoing a massive modernization programme and by 2020 would be the second-largest navy in the world. The Indian Navy (IN) too plans to have a 160-ship navy, placing it in the league of the 'Big Five' by 2022. The impetus that both nations are giving to their navies is evident from the budgetary support to both. Even their growing forays into each others traditional maritime spheres of influence indicate their desire to become 'blue-water' navies, serving their national maritime interests beyond their immediate frontiers. The author compares the growing interaction between the two navies in the international waters, by way of exercises, visits and military diplomacy in recent years, as a strong signal of their ambitions. Even as India touts the success of its 'Look East Policy' and the IN's increasing role in protecting its commercial interests, diaspora and energy sea lanes across the Malacca straits, the Chinese have embarked on a 'Go West' strategy, with the permanent presence of a flotilla in the Gulf of Aden and military overtures to island nations in the Indian Ocean to secure forward bases as also increase its footprint and commercial interests in Latin America and Africa. The author argues that a clash of interests is inevitable. India looks at China's 'string of pearls' strategy with suspicion and is particularly sensitive to development of ports by China in its immediate neighbourhood. China has been sensitive to the presence of IN in the South China Sea, an area that it terms as its 'core interest'. For China, the Hormuz is critical to its interests, a fact demonstrated by China by its growing proximity to Iran and its takeover of Gwadar port on the Makran coast. Raja Mohan argues that to effectively check China, India too needs to have a 'Go West' strategy, exploiting its goodwill on the back of a six million-strong diaspora and \$113 billion trade equation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In times to come, the author

believes that this growing security dilemma in Sino-Indian will result in a 'vicious cycle of competition, arms race and conflict'.

In this growing competition at sea, Raja Mohan argues about the inevitability of stamping on the US' toes, the paramount naval power in the world. He foresees a complex and complicated three-way relationship between the three countries in an attempt to maintain balance of power. He also sees opportunity for India in engaging like-minded democracies like Australia, Japan and Indonesia, even as it continues to engage China and the US to forge a new maritime world order in the Indo-Pacific.

The book is a must read for strategic thinkers, policymakers and men in uniform. The Mackinder school may not be entirely convinced of the book's key recommendations, arguing that the actual problem with China is essentially a land and air contingency, yet, Raja Mohan makes a compelling argument that the IN's growing capabilities at sea can offset the asymmetry between the two militaries. Quite correctly, he makes a case for confidence-building measures at sea on the lines of those existing on the land frontiers to ensure peace and stability on our maritime borders as well.