

Straightening the Straits

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The oceans are churning. India's overall maritime security environment is in the midst of momentous strategic change. New Delhi must deploy a smart mix of deterrence and diplomacy if it is to advance and protect its interests, balancing peace with national fulfilment, in this Indo-Pacific age.

This is the message of *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* by C. Raja Mohan, and it is one that policy elites would do well to heed.

Not only policymakers. This book is as much about China's historic turn to the sea and America's challenge in maintaining stability as it is about the maritime challenge for a rising India. For it will be the complex ballet among the strategic and economic interests of these three powers that determines, above all else, if the so-called Asian Century will be dominated by coexistence and cooperation, or by competition and conflict.

And the choreography of this geopolitical interplay will depend on the quality of leadership and decision-making in Beijing, New Delhi and Washington.

This important book is as much for international readers as it is for Prof Raja Mohan's compatriots. *Samudra Manthan* explains why India cannot and should not deny its destiny as an ocean-going power. India's development and economic future is inextricably bound with seaborne routes of commerce and energy supply.

For instance, India's now-strong trade ties with East Asia are almost entirely about seaborne trade. Even efforts to build land transport infrastructure into Southeast Asia will, if successful, involve connections to seaports.

Moreover, India's security will increasingly be bound to the sea. As the author reminds us, the China-India security dynamic will take on a maritime aspect. Even the prospect of stable nuclear deterrence between the giants will come to depend on submarines—as the recent test-launch of an Indian submarine-launched ballistic missile reminds us.

The book builds upon the legacy of the oft-neglected Indian geopolitical thinker K.M. Panikkar to emphasise New Delhi's need to be a comprehensive naval power in the Indian Ocean, patrolling its commons as well as being on call to defend India from coercion.

At the same time, Raja Mohan argues persuasively that this definition of India's maritime milieu needs to be expanded. India, like the US and China, is becoming an Indo-Pacific power, a key player in a strategic system that encompasses the Indian and Pacific oceans. This Indo-Pacific idea remains controversial, with some critics simplistically arguing that it is mere intellectual cover for retaining an active US security role across maritime Asia, and others insisting that the Indian and Pacific Oceans remain distinct subsystems with their own unique security problems.

But these old-fashioned critiques miss the point that the Indo-Pacific idea derives overwhelmingly from economics, energy and seaborne globalisation. More than anything else, it is China's acute dependence on energy imports across the Indian Ocean that means Beijing—like India—has no choice but to accept that it is a quintessentially Indo-Pacific nation, not purely an Asian one.

This in turn means China needs to get used to the fact that the context of its rise is not just East Asia—where it has a greater chance of calling the shots—but a wider region where it will need to build relations of mutual respect with India and factor in the interests of other states.

This offers a great opportunity for India to work creatively with others, like Australia, Indonesia and Japan as well as China and America, to craft maritime rules of the road in the Indo-Pacific commons.

In all of this, Indian observers need to look coolly at China's interests and activities in the Indian Ocean. This involves calmly distinguishing how much of the so-called 'string of pearls' strategy is composed of real pearls—potential points of access or basing for the PLA navy—and how much is just string, an understandable web of diplomatic ties where Beijing's interests are vulnerable.

It makes sense for India and China to start building mutual understandings about stability in their nautical neighbourhood. Raja Mohan rightly encourages early discussions on initiating confidence-building measures and rules to ensure that interactions at sea remain peaceful,

and that the tensions of China's eastern littoral are not replayed west of Malacca. The churning of the oceans need not mean war.