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Book Review

Raja Menon*

C. Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-India Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2013, 329 pp., ISBN-10: 0870032712, ISBN-13: 978-0870032714

Raja Mohan has written a book about events that may permanently alter the world's maritime environment, as a result of the rise of China and India. Many may be unaware that China has had the option to choose between being a continental and a maritime power at least twice in history – once in the 15th century after the incredible voyage of Zheng Ho. I know people call him Admiral Zheng Ho, but in fact he was a cavalry general before being appointed to command the fleet. The second occasion was in 1870, when China was faced with a choice of whether to strengthen its army or its navy on being attacked in the West in Xinjiang and in the East by Japan. On both occasions, China chose the continentalist alternative. This choice faces the leaders in Beijing once again and this time a different decision has been already made. China's rise and the cash it holds enables Beijing to opt for both continental and maritime routes to ensure strategic connectivity. Raja says that China early on considered the benefits of three transportation corridors through the sub-continent and its fringes. One would connect Lhasa with Kolkata, the Pakistan corridor would integrate the Karakonam highway with Gwadar on the Makran coast,

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and the Irrawady corridor through Burma would link Yuman with the Bay of Bengal. So, unlike the recent railway budget in Delhi, there is clearly some form and strategic thinking going on in China with the Xinjiang railway network coming up to the ninth 5-year plan and Tibet railway in the 10th plan. If all these connectivity plans give Indians the feeling of encirclement, the feeling is perfectly correct with Beijing's attention now focused on entering the Indian Ocean. Third-party observers might disagree with Indians and say that the transborder linkages of China's internal regions is a necessary part of economic development and are only indicative of its peaceful rise. But in the case of the Indian Ocean, China itself feels threatened by what it calls the Malacca dilemma.

Apart from the continentalist thrust southwards, there are analysts who point to the fact that the pattern of China's economic growth automatically gives it a preponderant maritime dimension. As Raja points out, trade was only 10% of China's GDP when modernization began and it grew to 62% in 2007. So there is an outward-growing China with deepening links overseas that must and will bring to the attention of China's strategic thinkers the need for a plan to ply the world's oceans in protection of their wealth. So it is not surprising that the lion's share of the defence budget is gradually shifting to the navy and the language coming from Beijing is increasingly Mahanian. Unlike in 1870 when China chose the continentalist strategy, Beijing today is rich enough to follow a maritime as well as a continentalist path.

Some western analysts feel that the growth of the plan is only enough to meet China's needs in the western Pacific and it would require an extraordinary large naval build-up for surplus forces to operate in the Indian Ocean. Perhaps there is an underestimation here of the rate of growth of China's GDP, its defence budget and its navy. But the expression 'Malacca dilemma' is of Chinese origin and attributed to Hu Jintao in a speech made in 2003. It clearly indicates that China has a Malacca dilemma in its own mind and that Beijing sees all the international efforts to protect sea lines of communication (SLOCSs) with multinational forces as a threat to its own shipping. Raja feels that even if the intentions of the USA were benign, China cannot entrust its energy security to outside powers. At the same time, western analysts have described China's efforts to divert its oil and gas via the land route pipelines as a pipedream, with no more than 12–15% of the oil going via pipelines, which in any case are far more vulnerable to attack.

If China has long-term plans to operate in the Indian Ocean, it would carefully lay the groundwork before it actually sent a task force to the Indian Ocean. When one surveys Chinese activities, it becomes clear that Beijing has already embarked on the many steps that mark the prelude to Indian Ocean operations. It has built up a massive warship-building infrastructure – it can turn out four destroyers a year simultaneously. Since 2008, it has begun to practise seriously long-term deployment of over 100 days on the Somalia patrol. It has begun infrastructure-building projects in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Seychelles and Mauritius, apart from investing in every African littoral of the East coast. Its leaders have made high-level visits to the Indian Ocean island territories. Chinese spokespersons have begun the information and public relations campaign to claim the right to bases in the Indian Ocean and the intention to operate there. In India, there is a belief that China will strive for a permanent foothold on the Indian Ocean littoral. As a commentator with a naval background, I do not think that a Chinese task force is tactically safe without continuous tactical air cover, which can only come from an aircraft carrier or large numbers of shore-based aircraft.

Now what about India in the ocean? After all, it takes two sides to pull the snake back and forth to churn the ocean and create the nectar. On paper, it sounds highly skewed when one says that soon India will have two aircraft carriers while China has only one under trials. The Indian Navy's share of the defence budget has been steadily rising from the steady 12% of the 1990s to 18% today. Indigenous warship building is proceeding very well, although there are serious delays in the submarine programme. The Indian Navy exercises with the Association of Southeast Asia Nation (ASEAN) navies regularly and there has been a focus on diplomacy with Vietnam. A strategic partnership agreement was signed in 2002 between the two Prime Ministers and the text talks of playing a role in regional security and strengthening cooperation in defence supplies and training. Indian strategic thinkers have long pushed the idea of Vietnam balancing China's partnership with Pakistan, particularly with such an attractive asset as Cam Ranh Bay. But going to Cam Ranh Bay would probably be too confrontational and push Vietnam beyond China's redlines. Similarly, there has been a strategic partnership agreement with Indonesia, which talks of defence supplies, defence technologies, joint production and joint projects. India has expressed its intention to support freedom of navigation in the

South China seas and supported Vietnam's claims based on United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the drilling dispute.

Most of all, China feels uneasy about what it feels in a closer relationship between India and the USA. It sometimes grows into a fear that the concert of democracies has actually taken off with a close naval cooperation between the USA, Japan, India and Australia. In fact, India has been cautious about its dealings with the USA and kept open the option of engagement with China. Very often, this has required walking a tightrope and reassuring Beijing that it would not join a US alliance. A senior US admiral has explained that the reason for underperformance of the Indo-US bilateral defence cooperation was India's concerns for strategic autonomy.

Quoting Panikkar, Raja states that India is the one true Rimland whose continental affiliations are negligible and it is inevitable for India to get into a close alliance of maritime states. Who are these states to be? India and the USA began an institutionalized dialogue about East Asia in 2010, and started a trilateral dialogue with Japan in 2011. The USA also conducts trilateral dialogues with Japan and Australia, as well as with Japan and South Korea. Secretary Clinton suggested in Chennai a trilateral with the USA, China and India. All these, Raja feels, could eventually lead up to a concert of Asian nations.

Raja feels that in a strategic environment of overlapping footprints, political confidence-building measures (CBMs) have done a great deal to mitigate misperceptions. All of them have come as an adjunct to high-level political visits, starting from Rajiv Gandhi's visit of 1988. Nevertheless, four factors produced significant instability in the bilateral relationship in the mid-2000s. The first was the railroad to Lhasa and the road networks in Tibet and Xinjiang; these significantly reduced the mobilization time for a Chinese attack from Tibet. Second was the series of aggressive patrolling to which China resorted, particularly in 2009. The third was the unexpected revolt in Tibet in 2008, which could well have been the cause for the aggressive patrolling, and the fourth was the Chinese attempt to undermine the Indo-US nuclear deal in the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) in 2008, while extending a similar deal to Pakistan.

It would help, Raja feels, for India and China to embark on maritime CBMs, as eventually it is the Indo-Pacific where the two navies will brush against one another and they could come through a maritime strategic dialogue. Unsaid in the tension between the two navies is the Indian primacy in the Indian ocean leading up to some

kind of a Monroe doctrine in the Indian ocean, and an equivalent Chinese Monroe doctrine in the West Pacific with its anti-access strategy.

What order might evolve in the Indo-Pacific? The author has constructive suggestions. The first is cooperative security with China being invited to the Indian Ocean initiatives provided there is reciprocity from the West Pacific. Another is an Asian concert in which Kaplan has suggested that the USA should take the initiative. The third is naturally a balance of power system, which at the moment is heavily loaded in favour of the USA, but may eventually be eroded. I would suggest that the last possibility is the most unstable and dangerous. The real challenge, as Raja says, is for the countries in the Ocean to recognize the legitimate interests of each other. He suggests a maritime dialogue, but perhaps there is a case for a civilizational dialogue. Is there an Asian way of conducting geo-politics that does not blindly follow western text books in arriving at balance of power politics? Many political philosophers have gone down that route earlier and today we might try to rediscover how far that route went. This is a dense book, dense in facts and analyses. It is eminently readable but policy makers and practitioners will find it a useful text and above all, the author has enhanced his reputation in writing this book. In the choice of the subject and in the way he has treated it, the author has ensured that the book will remain relevant for a considerable period.