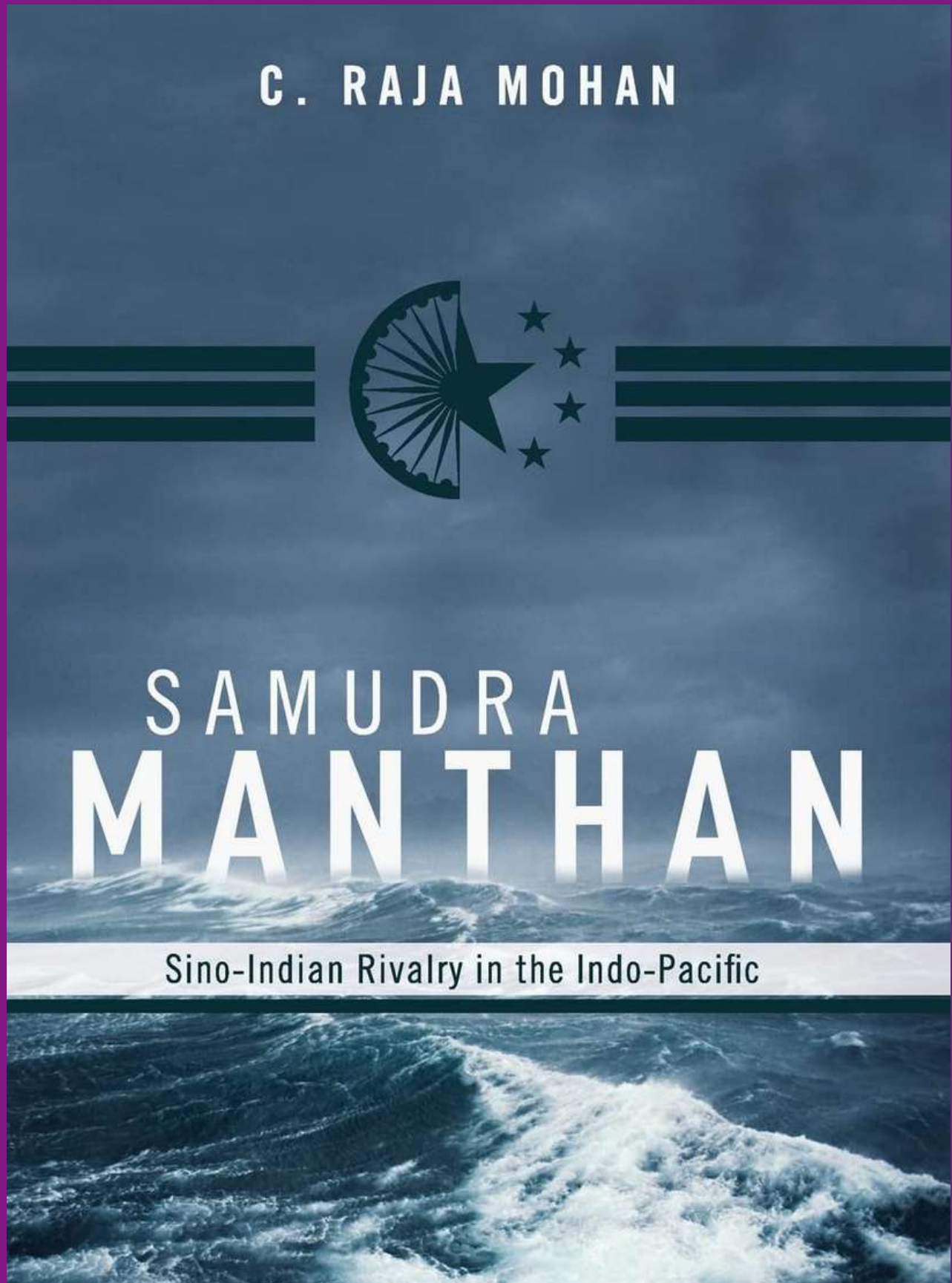


BOOK REVIEW

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

Authored by C. Raja Mohan



Introduction

The center of gravity in contemporary geopolitics has increasingly shifted away from the Atlantic Ocean and is moving in the direction of the Pacific Ocean, and specifically the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean. This is due to the resurgence of the two Asian juggernauts, China and India, whose growing economies and corresponding fuel demands as a result, have compelled them to become more aggressive on the high seas not only close to their coastlines such as the South China Sea in China's case, and the Indian Ocean in India's case, but to also intervene in each other's zones, causing severe disruptions in the seas surrounding South Asia, Southeast Asia, and West Asia. C. Raja Mohan, in his book, "Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific", makes an analogy between this disruption to the story of the churning of the oceans, as described in the epic of Mahabharata. The book was published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 2012 and consists of 329 pages.

Core Arguments

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 identifies broadly the five trends in the competition between India and China over control of the Indo-Pacific ocean. These include the consequences of their security clash for not just Asia but also on Africa, and the Middle East, a more proactive maritime engagement, the increase in the two-way trade, an emphasis on power projection, and the ways in which the U.S factors into the security dilemma between the two countries.

Chapters 2–3

The following two chapters (2-3) cover themes of globalization and the enduring animosity briefly touched up by the introductory chapter.

Chapter 4

The theme of globalization is further fleshed out in the 4th chapter with regard to the maritime operations carried out by countries in regions far beyond their immediate shores, and an important example of this is the anti-piracy operations against Somali pirates in 2008-9.

Chapter 5

The nuclear and space technology arms race in terms of acquisition, improvement and expansion of nuclear submarines, delivery systems, satellites as well as the conventional one involving marine and amphibious weapons such as destroyers, frigates, corvettes and aircraft carriers is the main topic under discussion in chapter 5.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 primarily zooms in on India's naval footprint in the Pacific Ocean through participation in multilateral forums such as ASEAN Regional Summit and engaging in joint naval exercises with Japan, Australia, and the US in the South China Sea.

Chapters 7–9

The primary concern of chapters 7-9 is the intensification of the securitydilemma between the two Asian giants in the Indo-Pacific Ocean. Ever since the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century, China has forged close ties in the form of ports and railroad projects with Sri Lanka(Hambantota), Bangladesh(Chittagong), Pakistan(Gwadar), and Myanmar (Kyaukpyu). India has also responded in kind to the Chinese incursion by signing bilateral agreements of commercial and military nature with Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives and Sri Lanka.

Chapters 10–12

The concluding three chapters (10-12) primarily highlight the various mechanisms through which the security dilemma could be averted, as well as the role of outside powers like Russia and the US in complicating the maritime geopolitical chessboard.

Advantages

Even though it emphasizes the realpolitik approach, it still sheds light on the conciliatory angle, as evident in the statement of Shivshakar Menon, the nationalsecurity advisor of India in 2012, who opposed the “determinism” of the foreign policy narratives of both countries. Similarly, even the Chinese representative, Dai Bingguo, advocated the need to shift from the notion of India and China perceiving each other as rivals to perceiving each other as partners, who could usher in a “golden period” for Asia.

One of the most significant insights from this reading is not just the shifting of the security dilemma from land to the ocean but also the globalization of this competition, with external powers like the US alongside others like Russia, having vested interests in the preservation of their status-quo and even expansion.

Disadvantages

The core assumption used by this book is one rooted in the realism paradigm,particularly drawing from the Mahan’s theory of Sea Power, and that the most viable mechanism for ensuring maritime stability is through the maintenance of the balance of power.

However, this core assumption can be critiqued for placing excessive emphasis on material power and the balance of power as the primary means of ensuring maritime stability. Such an approach may understate the importance of cooperation, diplomacy, institutions, and shared economicinterests in shapingrelations between Indiaand China. By viewing maritime competition predominantly through a realist lens, the book risks portraying rivalry and strategic competition as more enduring and structurally inevitable than they may necessarily be.

Conclusion

The text concludes by raising several important questions, out of which, the two most relevant seem to be whether the forces representing the old era will be able to triumph over the new and resurgent China in Asia and the other question pertains to how India would manage to maintainits strategic autonomyand even push back against the two great powers vying for supremacy in its zone of influence.