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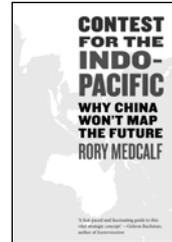
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Book Reviews

**Contest for the Indo-Pacific:
Why China Won't Map the Future**
Author: Rory Medcalf
Publisher: La Trobe University Press
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HARSH PANDEY

Projection of an optimistic future is not a thing that we tend to follow in the year 2020. From the beginning of the year, the risk of global pandemic COVID-19 started looming around the world. The difficulty was more for Australia, where the bushfires were already making things worse. Seeing a hopeful future does not look easy for the time being, but Prof. Rory Medcalf tries to make it so. In the latest addition to his scholarship, the Australian professor tries to paint a clear picture of the Indo-Pacific which, with its all-vibrant colours, forms an adequate set for abstracts. In his extensive career as Intelligence Analyst, Diplomat, Journalist and Academic, Prof. Medcalf engaged himself in the Indo-Pacific at various levels of work that involved national security to diplomacy and academics, what he likes to call Track II diplomacies. It can be one of the plausible reasons for the celebration of this work from the policy centres to academic circles. The book launch event was organised by Australian National University where Australian Foreign Minister and Shadow

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Foreign Minister gave their thoughts on the current geo-economics scenarios in the Indo-Pacific as they were talking about the book. The important takeaway from that event is that the Australian side has great faith in this brilliant academic. Its critics make the analogy of the elephant in the room and the Indo-Pacific, in the first chapter of the book. Prof. Medcalf argues that Indo-Pacific is not a new construction as the Asia-Pacific, or other connotations that this region has been given from time to time, according to the comfort and interest of the dominant players in the region. In the colonial era, when the region got into a clear division, at the same time Modern Science was using the term for fisheries and anthropology. The maps that were made in Australia, Korea, and China in various temporal settings gave a sense of the region's historicity. The first few chapters of the book dig deeper into that from the conquest of Indian empires in the region to the spread of religion, whether Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam. Giving a civilisational factor to a region whose large area is water is not an easy task. The historical concepts like Mandala can help us give the region stability, argues Prof. Medcalf. The multipolar future can pave the way for the survival of the region. The region has seen many failed attempts to achieve regional unity. The book argues that this has many reasons, namely, the Cold War, and bilateral disputes; another reason for the failed attempts can be said to be non-involvement of the right players. The Asian Relations Conference failed due to bilateral disputes among the member nations and the civil war in China. The Asia-Pacific left India a security provider in the Indian ocean and the world's largest democracy into nowhere. China, which was not comfortable with the term Asia-Pacific, is still not happy with Indo-Pacific, but that it has a grand strategy for this region is clear from its initiatives like Belt and Road and Maritime Silk Route. The next part of the book talks about the region's presence and challenges faced by its different players: The Nation States, lack of giving non-state actors a proper place to no felt at times the details of them overshadowed by the States. The region is dominated by small and big powers alike, and organisations like ASEAN and East Asia Summit provide a place for multilateralism to flourish in the region, where the threats of bilateral disputes loom from China-Japan to India and Pakistan. The largest and mightiest of them are China

and the USA. As the economic engines of the world are shifting eastwards and China is now controlling much of the world's supply chain, the clash between the USA and China may become a security dilemma for the region. The theatre for much of these activities will be the Indo-Pacific region. As the author argues, the present scenario poses a threat to the rules-based order developed over the years by the USA and its western allies. Strangely, the threat is coming from one of the makers of this order. The rise of China or "peaceful rise", what the Chinese like to call it, was needed to stabilise the region. However, from the recent past one can argue that this is not the case. In explaining the paradoxes that this region experiences, we can see the shift of the author's theoretical paradigm. He carefully draws a constructivist perspective, considering the realist implications. That is why nation-states occupied much of his arguments. The region showed great strength and solidarity for natural calamities like the Tsunami of 2004. The combined operations by the navies of the United States and India created an experience and turf for policy manoeuvring in this disaster. India's higher growth rates and its economic capabilities helped connect two of the world's largest democracies. Still, India is a hesitant player when it comes to allying, its ties with other powers of the region remain bilateral, which does not make much of the normative value to a particular system. However, another actor that shaped this region, Prof. Medcalf argues, is the pirates' role in making this region one of the world's most securitised places. It was the reason which caused China first to get its navy into the Indian Ocean. Unlike previous times it was here to stay, and it had a grand strategy which has clear implications on the different stakeholders of the region. The author made his point valid and clear that only multipolarity and a rules-based order can solve the region's ongoing and future problems. Climate change is one of them, from which the archipelagic states will suffer the most. A full-scale armed conflict in the region can intensify into a big war. This book is also a commentary on the recent political, economic, and diplomatic developments in the region from 2013. It gives us an understanding of what is going on in the region and what is wrong. Nevertheless, when we check it on a theoretical framework, the work can be done. The role of ASEAN and EAS in shaping the region is mentioned in the

book, but it fails to argue the extent to which the ASEAN centrality can be a guiding principle for the region. Furthermore, what is to be done about the Chinese influence inside the ASEAN? Will it not hamper the system of multilateralism and the diplomatic energy that states are giving to this? The suggestions provided in the book for the space of diplomacy need to be substantiated with a few examples. With all its goodwill and integrating approach, the COVID-19 pandemic's biggest threat made the states choose their paths differently. The regions have seen varied effects of the pandemic. The other states can learn from the responses of states like Vietnam. This book is an honest effort to combine policy parameters and academic thoughts and properly understand how future events can occur. Prof. Medcalf has been blessed with a keen perspective about the region, and we have seen this from his earlier works. A clear picture regarding this will be available after the threat of the pandemic ends.