

Thomas Fingar (ed.), *The New Great Game: China and South and Central Asia in the Era of Reform* (Studies of the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. xxi + 337 pp., including references and index. ISBN: 978-08047-9763-4 (PB).

This is an edited volume that brings together 13 chapters by experts in their fields. The chapters deal with different aspects of China and South and Central Asian relations but share the common objective of refining and testing preliminary judgements and hypotheses about China's priorities and calculus of decision-making. The book presents itself as an attempt to discover, describe and explain the significant drivers, characteristics and trajectories of China's interactions with the states of South and Central Asia during the period of reform and opening that began in 1979. Three questions form the basis of comparison across various issues and temporal and spatial dimensions: 1) what happened? 2) why did it happen that way? and 3) what impact did the interaction have on China, the other countries and the global system? The volume editor, Thomas Fingar, is a Shorenstein Distinguished Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University and has had a prominent career in national and international intelligence.

China's foreign policy calculus is shaped by two main considerations with regard to particular countries – what they can do *to* China and what they can do *for* China (national security and contribution to development). In line with this thinking, as Thomas Fingar points out, the perceived value of South Asia for China has changed from being a 'locus of potential security problems' (p.42) to a new window of opportunity (resources and markets) for sustained economic growth. From the Chinese perspective, India is the only nation in South Asia that requires strategic consideration, with Pakistan figuring only as a contrivance in its efforts to counter any security threat from India. Sino-Indian relations are discussed in further detail by Hu Shisheng and Srikanth Kondapalli (chapters 4 and 5). The Chinese perception of India's rise is characterized by Hu as benign and non-threatening, owing to the conviction that 'structural factors and inherent contradictions in India's political system will prevent India from overtaking China in terms of comprehensive national strength' (p.70). Hu concludes with certainty that India will not become part of a 'counter-China coalition' and that the requirements of sustained development now trump the security concerns of both sides. Contrary to this assuaged Chinese view of India, Kondapalli's assessment reflects an intensely rivalrous and distrustful Indian perception

about China (India perceives China to be its most important security challenge). In this chapter, the contemporary Sino-Indian relationship is characterized as marked by common purpose and mutual suspicion with legacy issues and intractable problems becoming real constraints to cooperation. S. Paul Kapur (chapter 3) identifies the US-India-China strategic triangle, an outcome of the US rebalancing policy in Asia, as a major determinant of the future trajectory of the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific region in general and India-China relations in particular. Syed Rifaat Hussain (chapter 6) examines the shifting contours of the enduring friendship between China and Pakistan. Hussain argues that Pakistan's value for China has not diminished, but has changed from being an overwhelmingly security-based (countering common enemy) alliance to becoming a significant ally in China's quest for development (energy transit routes).

Apart from India and Pakistan, the interaction between China and other smaller states of South Asia is also examined in the book, albeit to a limited extent. Swaran Singh (chapter 7) analyzes the Chinese engagement with countries in the vicinity of its southwest frontier regions (Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal). Singh's analysis reveals that domestic policies aimed at facilitating growth and control in the border provinces had a positive spill-over effect in improving relations with the neighbouring states. The economic dimension of China's engagement with South Asia is looked into by Vivek Arora, Hui Tong, and Cristina Constantinescu (chapter 12). While trade and financial integration between China and South Asian partners is much lower in magnitude, it is clear that the complementarities in this engagement outweigh any kind of direct competition. In a similar analysis, Zhao Huasheng (chapter 8) examines China's engagement with smaller states in Central Asia driven by geostrategic concerns centring on security, energy, transportation and other forms of economic engagement. Like Singh, Zhao argues that the evolution of China's strategic thinking in Central Asia was guided by the internal quest for modernization and sustained economic growth in China's 'rear areas'.

In chapters 9 and 10, respectively, Saman Kelegama and Sebastien Peyrouse examine the perspectives of South and Central Asian nations engaging with China (chapters 9 and 10). For countries in South Asia, as Kelegama argues, the Chinese involvement in terms of trade and investment is received with much appreciation in the face of India's history of benign neglect. Taking note of the increase in Chinese influence in South Asian countries, India has now started active involvement in the

region. However, Peyrouse's assessment of China's engagement in the Central Asian region is less upbeat. The Central Asian nations are suspicious of the intentions behind active Chinese investments, purchases and exported goods. The discontent over Chinese business practices and the tendency to use Han Chinese workers rather than hiring local workers is clearly discernible among the Central Asian nations. Igor Torbakov (chapter 11) discusses the competing strategies of Russia and China in the long-running competition for imperial primacy in Central Asia. While history and cultural ties facilitate a smooth engagement with Central Asian nations, the situation also rekindles vulnerabilities and disgruntlement among Chinese minorities residing in western frontier regions.

In connecting the dots, Fingar finds that initiatives trigger responses, and responses create new challenges and opportunities. The study underlines the fact that the great game has changed but is far from over. 'Interdependencies and integration are changing the calculus and possibility space of actors' (p.24). A recurring theme of the book is to explore the 'reciprocal' nature of relations between China and countries in South and Central Asia. There is an attempt to show how the goals and actions of both China and the other nations impinge on each other and create trends and patterns. In other words, while history, geography, resource endowments and levels of development are important factors in foreign policy calculus, the role of individuals, corporate actors and governments in other nations in moulding, enticing or deterring Chinese involvement cannot be underestimated.

In the final analysis, the book provides a wide-ranging understanding on the goals and priorities of China when it comes to engagement with South and Central Asia. However, the work, as comprehensive as it may seem, lacks nuanced insights regarding the contemporary dynamics of China's relations. The conclusions drawn are too simplistic and there is an overwhelming focus on South Asia as compared to the Central Asian nations. Nevertheless, the work deserves credit in bringing forth the perspective of other nations in China's international engagements. The book is an important edification in the study of China's foreign policy.

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